Blade Unforgiving

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Archive Warning: **No Archive Warnings Apply**
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Character: **Castiel (Supernatural), Dean Winchester, Sam Winchester, Garth Fitzgerald IV, Benny Lafitte, Anna Milton, Jo Harvelle, Gordon Walker, Michael (Supernatural), Balthazar (Supernatural), Mary Winchester, John Winchester, Charlie Bradbury, A FEW OC'S OKAY, I REALLY WANTED THEM TO BE THERE SO THEY'RE THERE**
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by **DeanOh**

Summary

Castiel Novak is a shadow, a silent man with few friends and a difficult life. When his brother, King Michael, buys himself a rare royal Dragossi, Castiel is tasked with hatching the creature and turning it into a weapon of war. But the unimaginable happens - the egg is stolen, and Michael gives Castiel an ultimatum; either Castiel brings the hatchling back to its rightful place, or dies a painful death.

Dean is a Brothel errand boy who would do anything to keep his brother, Sam, safe. After an offer for Sam’s freedom is made in exchange for a Dragossi egg, Dean drops everything to steal one from the King. But an accidental bond with the mischievous Dragossi hatchling makes things difficult, and when Dean realizes he’s stolen a royal Dragossi, he sets out to return it and avoid retribution.

The two men are set on a path, circumstance making them unlikely allies, and Castiel slowly,
yet surely, falls for the simple man with a heart of gold. It becomes a choice between loyalty to his King, or faith in a beautiful thief.
A King Arthur AU with a twist and the love story that defied a kingdom.
Through The Valley

Chapter Notes

I don't know how to even begin explaining what I have done, and how proud of myself I am for writing the longest fic I have ever written to date. I haven't written anything substantial in like two years, but when I started this fic six months ago, I didn't know it'd grow into a full novel. Who woulda thunk it? Not me.

I really want to thank my artist, Aceriee (missaceriee on Tumblr!!!), who has done such a wonderful and amazing job. The first time she sent me the first draft image of what vision she had for the fic, I just about had a heart attack. She felt the fic, and felt the story so much, the artwork is simply breathtaking. I'm so excited you guys are gonna feel the magic of her art. I included the art into this fic, and please please please go reblog all of the art from her tumblr. She drew more than I even anticipated, and even made the banner, as well as those amazing chapter headers. God, Ace, I can't thank you enough for your continuous support throughout this challenge. Hugs and kisses.

I would like to thank my first beta, Rebecca (darter_blue here and on tumblr!) for working on this fic with me for mooooonths. Without you, this fic would lay in my docs untouched, unedited, and an absolute mess. You helped me with everything, be it my stupid meltdowns, or really dumb mistakes. Be sure to check out her work, she's a brilliant writer, and has a few Destiel fics that I love dearly up on her Ao3! Show her some love please!!!!

Art here:
http://archiveofourown.org/works/12390219
https://missaceriee.tumblr.com/tagged/dcbb17bu

I'd also like to thank Katie (justholdingstill on tumblr, and justholdstill on ao3). You swooped in and edited the last bits of my fanfic, at the last possible second. Holy shit, the relief you've brought me is insane. Thank you so so so so so much for reading through the ENTIRE THING in ONE day. You're the MVP.

Finally, thank you to the mods of this challenge for always being there for us, and for the entire Discord chat and your support. You guys are amazing, and I swear to God, I will never look at mushrooms the same way again because of you people. I love you a lot. This fic is dedicated to you.

(I wanted to also dedicate this fic to Anna Kam on facebook. You know who you are, and I immensely enjoy our bee-keeping, teacher!Dean rpg, and I really, really hope you're going to get better. Much love xx)

Well. Okay. That's about it. I'll leave warnings where they're needed!

Please leave a comment or two, I have to get my kids through college. I don't have any kids, though, but I appreciate all the help I can get.
The winds of winter came unexpectedly in the dead of the night, frost lingering on glass. Ice tendrils danced on still water, covering every single lake in a sheer, glittering surface. It's never been this bad before, never this fast – winter used to take her time decorating the entirety of Jarsaki and its darkest lands. But today, winter did her job, and did it well.

One lake, though, she left alone. One, she did not dare touch, did not dare enter the realm, fearing the heat of the wrath she'd unleash if she contained the creatures of the lake within. Dragossi. Winter gave them a kiss, the barest of touches, but walked away without looking back. In turn, the creatures left the flames simmering, the lake warm to the touch, but not hot enough to destroy the creation she left every time she took a step on dry land; crumbling leaves, fallen trees, dead men. The woman inside of the lake watched Winter go, resting next to the blade stuck in the middle of a forehead of a Giant that once lived. Waiting.

* * *

Dean has dreams of water, and fire.

He'll stare into the eyes of a woman. Eyes full of crystal blue heat, her blonde hair moving like smoke as he chokes on gulps of water down his lungs. Whenever she opens her mouth to tell him how to swim up, he wakes up drenched in sweat and Sam’s already placing a pitcher of water next to his raggedy bed. In the early hours of the morning, Dean pulls Sam into a hug, and keeps chanting, “I'll save you. I'll save you.”

That's all he thinks about when the heavy-set scaled egg lies in his arms as he's running down a small street, his feet carrying him through the mud and rain. The egg's a little warm to touch, hardly ten minutes away from its nest, where it's actually supposed to be, hatching. Right now, Dean's body
heat provides enough cover for the red rust of it to faintly glow.

Dean's cursing under his breath, feeling his wet feet tremble from the cold, and his breath turns to smoke with every lungful of air he takes in. He's shaking pretty badly, but he's got no other option than to run as fast as he can and deliver the egg before it's too late.

There are a million voices in his head, drowning out every other sound coming up from behind him. He forgets the Guards that are after him, all dressed in black leather with titanium belts, only their black-cast swords rising up as a warning. Alchemical sirens are going off all around the city, thundering down from the sky, placed upon the shoulders of Giants still standing.

If Dean had had time - if he ever had time - he would take a precious moment to stare at the stone Giants scattered around the city. The tallest ones could be seen from every part of Jarsaki, but he prefers the smaller, more humble ones. The Jarsaki had really loved the Giants, sometimes calling them their Gods and saviors. Other countries considered them enemies; some tolerated them due to treaties. Ever since the Calamity, after the Giants turned to stone, the people of Jarsaki had devoted all of their time and energy to build a city around them instead of scavenging for building material. Though men and women around the world used the stone for their homes, carved vicious things into them (so cruel to the Giants that had tried to live with everyone in peace) the Jarsaki left their own Giants standing. The Giants were surrounded by small dark houses, and only the Keep Giant had a palace carved inside of it, worthy of a royal family. Unlike most of the countries in Seratonia, Jarsaki took pride in the anger their Giants seemed to have left behind. But be that as it may, Jarsaki hadn’t loved their Giants enough. The gaping holes in their chests would bear the mark of betrayal for years to come. Dean remembers the first time Sam asked him about the one Giant the royal family lived in. A giant with its head in the clouds, hands outstretched, as if begging for mercy.

“Will they ever come back?” Sam had wondered, wolfing down his porridge in the Brothel kitchens.

Dean had ruffled his hair, then, back when Sam wouldn't slap his hand away. “Unlikely, kiddo. Even if they turned back to themselves, they'd fall down dead.”

Sam's curious eyes had met Dean's. “Is it because they've been standing for so long?”

“No,” Dean said, digging into his food, too. “No. They've had their hearts stolen. Nobody would want to live without their heart beating in their chest. Not even them.”

And now, as Dean is taking a rough turn toward an even smaller street, filled with laundry and soft oats for pigs, he thinks about the wrath on the faces of Giants. Of the utter disgust to be found there.

He hears shots in the air, then screaming and horns blowing. They're getting closer to him, but he just hugs the egg to his chest, nearly burning himself in the process. The egg's getting hotter with every step he makes, and Dean prays to whatever God is closest to let him have this one win.

*I'll save you, Sammy.*

Dean looks back to see lights coming forward, then slams into something hard and solid.

The second he looks up and sees one of the low-grade Guards standing there, Dean knows he's done for. So he makes a disgruntled sound, and punches the Guard in the face.

The impact doesn't do anything good, but the heat is even more uncomfortable than it was before. It's growing, growing, growing so fast Dean can barely keep it up. The Guard picks Dean up by the collar of his cloak, raising him up in the air like a feather.

Dean knows he's absolutely fucking done for, but he holds onto the egg for dear life, and thinks, *I'll*
never save you.

The crack is loud.

Dean’s head swims when light shines through, brighter than any starlight the Guards used for shining their way through to him. It’s red and yellow, flashing in deep, warm colors into the night. The Guard holding him looks surprised for a second before the light blinds him too.

Dean’s hands burn, but he can’t move them away from the source. He screams out in agony, losing his fucking mind over the light, and the sensation of something holding on to him, to his entire soul.

Something snaps into place as he’s dangling, the heat burns as if it’s a thousand stars, and then everything calms down in a second. Dean is still there, still holding the egg, but once the Guard recovers from his temporary blindness, Dean feels…emptiness in the egg.

Quickly, he looks down to find the top broken, the creamy insides of the egg remain but there is nothing alive inside of it.

Until the Guard tries to punch Dean again.

A small screech comes from Dean’s shoulder pads, then the sound of scratching fills the night air - something dark and small latches onto the Guard’s face, nails cutting deep into his skin. The Guard screams, alerting everyone else chasing after Dean, but Dean’s standing there, dumbfounded, staring at the Guard and the creature attacking him so ferociously.

“What the fuck,” Dean says out loud, when he feels a tug on his soul. A small, angry, barely-there tug.

To his own surprise, Dean decides to reach out and tug back, feeling the lingering line of red respond to his thoughts. The creature, in the dim cast of the street lights, instantly raises its head. It looks at Dean. Red eyes stare into his, and immediately, Dean knows who is on the other side of the line.

“Holy. Fucking. Shit,” he says, instantly regretting this entire operation. “Oh no, buddy.”

The little hatchling stops assaulting the Guard, and jumps back on top of Dean’s shoulders, coughing a small ball of fire when it nuzzles its face into Dean’s neck. The bond warms up, marginally better than what Dean went through a minute ago.

Dean lets himself breathe a moment too long. He blinks, looks up into the sky, feeling drops of water coming down on his face, and for the first time in his miserable life, he’s calmer than fish in clear water.

It doesn’t last long. Remembering how fucked he’s going to be soon, Dean steps over the groaning Guard and starts running again, this time with more fervor. Fucking hell, how is he going to explain the hatchling to Crowley? Running doesn’t help the increase of anxiety when he thinks about Crowley and Sam’s debt.

Dean pretends the egg didn’t break, holds the egg pieces in his hands like precious cargo. The little creature holds on for dear life as Dean exits the city, leaving the sirens and Guards behind him, clustered in groups of three or four. Lady Night consumes him, hiding him from every seeing eye. Dean is left with the tiny Dragossi, and the warm line inside of Dean’s soul. Even though he’s got no time at all, he manages to stop in his tracks just to see the Giants standing still, rain washing away the dirt and dust from their stone-clothes, stone-faces, stone-everything. Wishing he could see their faces, Dean turns, and runs into the deep forests, the Dragossi silently slithering inside of his soaked linen.
“He’s going to kill you,” Samandriel says, looking through the giant curtain into the dungeon tunnel. No one’s there yet, but Samandriel’s hands shake, sweaty fingers clutching the rough dark-blue fabric. “He’s going to kill both of us.”

Castiel’s standing behind an oak table, clustered with notes, quills, burnt candles and unfinished snacks. He’s the very image of calm, his dark curls brushed up, a lamp of starlight illuminating his blue eyes. Dressed in his usual day-to-day linen, he doesn’t resemble any of the other Dragossi Masters in Seratonia. Castiel’s simple approach to breeding and training Dragossi earned him a few great names over the years, but his casual manner of dress still earns him bad ones, too.

“He won’t,” Castiel mumbles under his breath, thumbing through one of the books he had hand-written, with pictures of Dragossi at every stage of their growth. “It isn’t the first time a hatchling has gone missing.”

“Not missing. Stolen!” Samandriel says, glaring back at Castiel, who doesn’t seem to care one bit. “Not even a hatchling, Castiel. An egg. A very rare breed as well, might I add.”

“You’re telling me this as if I don’t know,” Castiel says calmly.

Samandriel’s hand tightens on the curtain. “He didn’t just pay for a Red Ruby Dragossi for it to be stolen from his own fucking Keep. How the hell are you not freaking out?”

Castiel sighs, then closes the book shut. His sort-of apprentice, Samandriel, has been losing his mind from the second they realised the nest was empty. Castiel did routine checks every night, feeding the Dragossi living underneath the Keep, and checking on the other, younger hatchlings he’s been rearing to be sold. He’d kept the Red Ruby inside of a Tree Green Dragossi nest; the female he called Jarra was more than happy to let an egg that wasn’t hers inside of her home. Thankfully, Red Rubies were never a problem when it came to hatching underneath a different Dragossi. Nor did the other Dragossi complain about a Red Ruby under their wing.
“The Red Ruby will come back,” Castiel says.

Samandriel doesn’t hear him, because the second Castiel’s sentence ends, he hisses, “He’s here.”

Castiel doesn’t much mind talking to the King of Jarsaki, but once he hears the unmistakable sound of his diamond encrusted, iron-heeled shoes even his heart skips a beat. His horde of Crow Guards enter first, throwing the curtains aside, revealing the dungeon tunnel and the King, unhurriedly walking toward Castiel.

Samandriel disappears through one of the storage room doors.

Castiel just touches his forehead with his thumb, and drags it down towards his lip in silent greeting, avoiding the King’s eyes.

The Guards all fall down on their knees, heads bowed down in respect.

“You’re allowed to meet my eyes, brother,” the King says, his voice smooth. Edging on venomous. “I wish you treated me like family, instead of greeting me as your King.”

Castiel raises his eyes to meet Michael’s ice-cold glare, remembering every time he’s seen Michael order his Guards to slaughter the Keep’s elite, just because he didn’t like them looking into his soul. Castiel’s stomach clenches whenever he has to stare at his brother. “My apologies,” he says, then gestures at a raggedy chair he uses mostly for price negotiations with potential buyers. “Would you like to sit dow-”

“The Red Ruby is gone,” Michael interrupts, walking around the gods-forsaken chair, the tips of his fingers lightly touching Castiel’s notes. Castiel follows Michael’s movements like a hawk. Michael stops, taking a small breath in, head cocked to the side. “Might I ask where?”

Castiel stands still as a stone Giant. “It was stolen, my King.”

Michael purses his lips as he nods solemnly. “By who?”

“The Guards are still looking into it,” Castiel explains, fearlessly. “I am certain we’re going to have the Red Ruby back before sunrise.”

Michael looks up from Castiel’s notes. His steel armor shines with a pearlescent sheen, a color you could only get from the heart of a Giant, the dust of the beautiful gem that once beat inside of a Giant’s chest. “Certain?”

Castiel’s been studying Red Rubies for the entirety of his life, and he definitely knows this - a hatchling will always, always come back into its nest.

“Red Rubies hate leaving their home,” Castiel says, handing a paper with the same explanation on it to Michael’s waiting hand. “Whatever happens, it will come back even when it’s dying. With their last breath, they will crawl back so they can pass peacefully.”

Michael reads the paper for what seems like forever. His Crow Guards stay still on their knees, and Castiel thinks it must hurt sitting like this whenever Michael needs to talk to his family.

“Is there a possibility it won’t?” Michael asks, placing the paper back on the table. The room seems to shrink by the second.

Castiel gulps down his nerves. “Rarely does a Red Ruby change nests,” Castiel says. “In the event of a bond, the Red Ruby will consider the host somewhat of a nest.”
Michael goes still.

Castiel notices instantly. The cold rage. “Like I said,” Castiel proceeds, cautious. “It’s a rare event that a Red Ruby would ever bond with anyone. The person must have something extraordinary inside of them for it to work.”

Michael moves again, walking around Castiel this time, stopping only to say, “A Guard is dead. Find me the fucking dragon and bring it to me by morning. That’s an order.”

Michael uses the word, dragon. An ancient, unused word Castiel dislikes to the point of his stomach churning. A Dragon used to be a dumb animal. A Dragossi is an equal.

With that, Michael leaves, just as slowly and confidently as he walked upon entering. The Crow Guards rise one by one, following him out, ignoring Castiel as a whole.

The tension stays, though, so when Samandriel deems it safe to re-enter the room, Castiel breathes out shakily. Their eyes meet, worried.

“We are royally fucked,” says Samandriel.

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Red eyes stare into his green, unblinking. Dean’s been trying to feed the creature red meat for the past hour, as Crowley taps his foot to the ticking of the clock.

“You stole a fucking Red Ruby,” Crowley spits out again, afraid of approaching the counter, where the hatchling lays, disinterested in the meat Dean’s still offering. “I told you to get me one of the Earth breeds. Not a gods-damned royal Dragossi!”

There’s no one else in the Hall of the Brothel, all the women and men already in their rooms with their respective customers. Sam’s locked in his bedroom, away from the clusterfuck Dean has got himself into. Dean dangles the meat in front of the Red Ruby, feeling a disgust at the sight that isn’t exactly his. “I can fix this,” he says, looking back at Crowley. “I can bring it - her - back, and get you another one.”

The Red Ruby hisses, anger and hurt going through the line, and Dean winces.

“It’s a her? Oh no fucking thank you,” Crowley says, hands in his pockets. “You couldn’t hold up your end of the bargain, and I’m done expecting something out of you and your brother.”

Dean abandons the meat, eyes wild. His hands tremble a little when he turns toward Crowley. “Please,” he says, voice shaking. “I’m begging here. Take me instead of Sam, then. Leave him here, let the kid work as your accountant or something, but take me instead.”

Crowley clicks his tongue. “Not to be a downer or anything, but your face wouldn’t sell. Zhwai like them pure and educated.”

Dean’s heart breaks, a thousand times. “I can get educated. I can be purified, with the trial. It’s easy, I can even do it mysel-“
The Red Ruby climbs on top of his hand, then maneuvers herself inside of Dean’s shirt. Her sharp nails sting a little, but Dean welcomes the pain.

Crowley stands for a while, groans. “Fucking Seven Giants,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Alright. The price on Sam’s head is four rings. Bring them to me by Friday, and I’ll take you to Zhwai.”

Dean’s entire world turns, but the panic attack never comes. The warmth of the hatchling calms him instantly, making him consider every single word turning in his head. Every swear, lash out, angry word leaves his mind, and he just says, “Yes. Thank you. Fuck, thank you, Crowley.”

Crowley nods over at Dean’s moving shirt. “Piece of friendly advice - return the Red Ruby before the King has your head bashed into the ground. Preferably before they find out it’s gone.”

The nails bury into Dean’s skin, but Dean doesn’t let out a sound. The line trembles with fear. Again, not his own.

Crowley leaves him alone in the Hall, covered in sweat and dirt from the woods he crossed. This was a stupid, ridiculous idea. He should’ve known he’d never be able to protect Sam. Not living like this. What the hell was Dean expecting all this time, anyway? That he’d be able to buy Sam out of the freaking Brothel? Sam’s been rapidly approaching the age where he’d be an expensive trophy for the highest paying customer. Dean’s never, ever, been on the selling lists, solely because of the unusual markings all over his body, dark circles and writings of an unknown language that grew with him. Tainted, the girls had said when he’d been found curled around baby Sam, hiding in the barn behind the Brothel.

Sam.

Dean grabs the meat off the counter, and leaves the heavily scented Halls, runs through the flowers on the ground, and avoids the man-made ponds filled with glitter dust. The Red Ruby never leaves the warmth of Dean’s shirt, so when Dean approaches the servant quarters, the line is quiet.

He knocks on the door, first, three times, then rapidly. Sam opens up, eyes wide and red. Dean looks inside of the room. Finds a starlight candle on the barely-standing table, with a heavy-set book open on top. Figures.

Dean pushes through Sam, while Sam locks the door again.

“How did it go?” Sam asks, breathless.

Dean drags a hand down his face. “Great,” he lies, meeting Sam’s eyes. “You’re free.”

Sam’s whole face lights up, hands come up to his heart, relieved. Dean’s eyes don’t leave Sam’s face, memorizing each and every line.

“I knew it!” Sam says, voice lowered, yet still happy as hell. It takes a moment, but Sam sounds unsure, “Wait. What about you? What did he say about you?”

Dean knows he won’t be able to tell Sam the truth. He won’t ever be able to tell him he’s going far, far away, to a land where they speak a forbidden language laced with magic so vile, he can’t stomach even saying it out loud. “I’m still not off the hook. A couple of years, and I’ll be able to come see you in whatever Library you’re going to be working in.”

Sam’s fingers curl into fists. “I’m not going anywhere until Crowley lets you go with me.”

Dean holds up a hand, silencing his brother. “Come Friday, you’ll sit in a caravan cart, and get out of
Jarsaki.”

“The hell I will-”

“Sam,” Dean says, unmoving. “This isn’t a gods-damned discussion.”

Sam’s mouth opens, then closes. Then opens once more. “I’m not going to Salitia. I’m not going to Nethereal. I sure as hell am not going anywhere else without you. Not when I know for sure you’re going to be slaving around for Crowley and his gang of idiots.”

“Look - “

“Don’t you look me, Dean,” Sam says, practically shaking. “We’ve always been in this together. I’m not leaving you.”

Dean’s about to cry in front of his fucking brother. So he gets up, blows out the starlight, and stands in the dark, feeling the Red Ruby cuddle his chest. “Sleep. We’ve got work in the morning.”

Sam’s hand rests on Dean’s shoulder, but Dean shakes it off. Unlocks the door and leaves. He doesn’t wait to hear Sam locking the door, doesn’t think about anything else, just cuts through the servant’s exit into the night, once again hoping for the rain to wash away his sins.

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Castiel’s donning his riding gear, buckling up the dark armor in place as Samandriel feeds Jarra, a feisty Dragossi. She’s bigger than both of them, but acts as if she’s still a hatchling when Castiel looks her in the eye.

“You sure she’s going to smell the Red Ruby?” Samandriel asks worriedly. Jarra eats straight out of his hand, small bites of emeralds and other crystal gems.

Castiel checks if he’s got everything on him. A backpack filled to the brim with gems, a sword in its sheath, and his riding boots. A wide belt filled with orbs of every color. He turns to grab the saddle. “She’s been living with the egg for two months now, of course she will.”

Samandriel helps put the saddle on Jarra, then pats her on her scaly head. She’s always been a beautiful Dragossi, her green-blue skin has cracks of gold, and her wings shine in the sunlight, glittered with every color known to man as she flies. She’s just as stunning in the moonlight, of course.

Castiel takes a deep breath, but stops before speaking. Samandriel waits, anticipating what Castiel wants to tell him. Castiel finally finds the words. “If I don’t come back before sunrise, take all of the hatchlings and run.”

Samandriel nods. Satisfied that they have an understanding, Castiel takes Jarra out through the pathway between nests, and out through the wide opening with water flowing inside.

There’s a waterfall hiding the entrance to the Dragossi dungeons beneath the Keep. Partly because it’s great for hiding something you don’t want to be seen, partly because Dragossi are always thirsty and every Dragossi Master couldn’t possibly have enough time to keep them satisfied. Even now, a few low-breed Dragossi lay next to the beautiful cerulean water, lazily drinking the clear liquid.
Castiel hops into the saddle, his toes just barely touching the surface of the water, and lets Jarra drink some before he squeezes his thighs to urge her forward.

Jarra is more than happy to extend her wings, the gem-like glitter reflecting on the walls of the cave. Other Dragossi bear her no mind as she jumps into the air, heading straight for the waterfall. Castiel grabs the silver orb attached to his belt, one of his own making, forged from the sands of Lafallka. He’s never been much of an alchemist, but some knowledge of the secret magical art has proven to be very welcoming whenever he has to go on long travels to other countries. Each colored orb has a different ability, that requires a very specific way of breaking. Frankly, Castiel’s lost many of them because he’s too lazy to learn the art of destroying. With the silver one, Castiel prays to one of the Keep Gods, hoping he hasn’t woken them with his excessive cursing. Some of the Gods keep to themselves at this hour, but some stay up to hear late night prayers.

Before they hit the waterfall, Castiel feels the cold on his breath, grabs onto the orb, and throws it over him in a graceful half-circle, just as Jarra’s tail hits the ball with full speed, breaking it open. An umbrella-like wall forms out of thin air, shielding Castiel and Jarra from the oncoming water, the protection as fragile as the orb itself. Once Castiel is safe from getting wet, the wall crumbles, falling into the lake below with a heavy splash. Jarra lets out a small sound of disappointment, but Castiel is more than happy to be dry, especially when the first snow touches the tip of his nose, and freezes the ends of his curly hair. Winter comes unexpectedly.

Out in the city of Patheo, the capital of Jarsaki, Castiel maneuvers Jarra over the beautiful homes of the Crow people. In darkness, it’s difficult to see where one house starts and the other ends. Jarsaki are famous for their black sand, night-dark armor, and almost non-existent bright colors. Castiel loves every inch of this city, but his heart aches for more. For adventures, other languages, different cultures around Seratonia, and yet, Michael wants him here, so he stays. The second he gets to ride a Dragossi he feels freedom, and laughs so loudly, even the stone Giants look happy.

Jarra flies around the Keep a few times, sniffing the air for the Red Ruby, so Castiel has time to assess the Giant that houses his family and look for any damage in need of repair. The stories say that the Keep Giant used to have a name, and a title, long since forgotten. The first Nethereal Emperor called for a ritual and paid a dear price no one knew about for the death of the Giants. The Giants had formed the hills of Jarsaki, and strengthened ties between countries with their pure hearts, and calm, loving eyes. Surely, the Keep Giant isn’t the tallest one - there are Giants around the world with hearts still intact, solely because no one can reach them. Castiel hopes they stay that way. Maybe one day they’ll wake up and mourn their friends.
Jarra lets out a screech and flies forward, in the general direction of the Jarsaki forests that line the west border of Patheo. The forests serve as a defense line, but the people who live in the outskirts, the small villages on the other side, know every single way to enter Patheo without getting killed by the wild-life that lies deep within. Castiel has heard of lost lakes, ancient crypts left there by their ancestors. There are multiple tellings of people witnessing wild Dragossi in the Jarsaki forests, untamed, unreached. Jarra flies over Patheo, and then even higher over the forests, her muscles tensing as if she’s feeling the wild Dragossi calling to her. No tame Dragossi enjoy flying over the danger of the forest.
Castiel pats her on her neck, easing her discomfort a little. “I have some emeralds for you,” he coos, getting her attention away from whatever she’s hearing down below. “As soon as we find the Red Ruby, you can have the whole backpack to yourself.”

He’s got some rubies for the actual royal Dragossi, if it’s even hatched. Castiel fears the Red Ruby might be hatched already, because Jarra’s speed picks up. That can only mean she’s smelling a living, breathing Dragossi, instead of a damn egg.

Being a Dragossi Master takes its toll even on the strongest of people. Castiel hates thinking of his learning days, of every single time he got his hands burnt from a teenaged Dragossi, who were all pissy little creatures. Castiel’s slightly afraid for the thief, mostly because Red Rubies require special care as soon as they hatch.

Jarra squeaks, quietly enough for Castiel to hear. Her whole body goes rigid, back trembling against Castiel’s hand. She does this all the time whenever Castiel takes her out to fly, but this time it concerns him. Patting her, Castiel looks down at the forest, the dark branches hiding mysteries beneath, unmoving even though the wind is blowing. Jarra lets out a huff, then changes course.

Before Castiel can push his thighs together to get her back on track, she turns once more, abruptly. Castiel can barely hold on as she goes in circles, sounding out her frustration.

“What’s wrong?” Castiel asks her, holding on to her scales for good measure.

Jarra, of course, shakes with the need to fly away from the forest, but keeps circling the same place. Then, flies further back, and circles again. Over and over and over, until it clicks in Castiel’s head.

She’s smelling the Red Ruby inside of the forest.

Castiel thinks for a moment, while Jarra continues her cries of discomfort. He can’t ask her to dive into the forest itself, due to her fearful nature. He can’t jump in himself, because he knows next to nothing about what lies within. Castiel has been there twice, and twice left shivering, face as white as a sheet of paper. The forest really likes fucking with your head.

Castiel used to really like fairytales about the forests, meadows filled with star stones that never lost their glimmer, whispering trees that told stories about worlds unseen, precious gems that held powers one could obtain for themselves if they ever found them. He liked the dark tales, too. The Laume women and men with their long golden hair, creeping into the villages to weave never-ending thread in their homes until they could murder their hosts in cold blood and steal their children. The Green Devils, with their pointed hats and shoes hiding the hooves they could barely walk on, with their offers of wealth and beauty for a price no one wanted to pay. The wild Dragossi were Castiel’s favorite of all. Their anger, mischief, and black magic seeping through their veins.

Castiel’s mother never let any of them go into the forests. Stories were left as stories, and gradually, fear set in.

He sits above the forest, heart pounding in his ears, thinking he’s going to have to face the forest because of his brother and for a Dragossi egg he never wanted to take care of in the first place.

Checking if he has the invisibility orb, Castiel presses a comforting hand into Jarra’s scales. “I’m going to have to ask you to let me down into the forest, Jarra,” he said. Jarra answered in a terrified huff. “I know. I shouldn’t have to be alone there, but I don’t want you to be more afraid than you are right now. Let me down, and wait for my whistle.”

Jarra tries another circle, but Castiel squeezes his legs for her to go down, and she does. Castiel’s
breath catches in his lungs as they approach the tree line, the wind almost non-existent the closer they get to the ground. He thinks about the rotten teeth of Laume eating away at his skin, then raising him from the dead to steal innocent children. He thinks about dealing with a wild Dragossi that he couldn’t or wouldn’t understand. *Fuck.* It’s overwhelming.

Jarra starts shaking the second both of them hit the trees, spiraling down gracefully. Her wings glitter with rainbows when the glowing tree saps illuminate them. It’s uncomfortably silent while they’re falling, the sap gets into Castiel’s leather armor, but the glow stops the second there’s no more life for it to suck out.

Castiel takes a deep breath and lands.

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Dean’s toes are freezing. It takes him less than five minutes to reach the forest, his breeches still wet from the chase in Patheo. The Red Ruby clings to his chest with her sharp claws, so before he enters the forest again, he grabs the collar of his shirt, and looks down at the hatchling.

“My skin isn’t a scratching post, claws,” he says to the small Dragossi. She raises her red eyes to his, and lets out a squeak.

To be honest, he’s getting so cold, he barely feels the sharp pain from her accidentally brushing a claw the wrong way. If he doesn’t hurry back til dawn, he might be getting more than a cold. The line inside of his chest is unpleasant.

Thinking about the Brothel, Dean goes in through one of the safer clearings. Growing up around promiscuous women and men, cleaning the rooms after their encounters with clients, helping clients choose their nightly companions is hard work, and he doesn’t get a penny for it. Sure, he and Sam learned a few tips and tricks for stealing money from the rich drunk clients, and yet, Dean’s never made enough to get Sam out of that place. Until Crowley approached him with an offer to pay off Sam’s debt for a Dragossi egg.

Brothels, even now, are an uncommon thing in Jarsaki. Jarsaki people rarely feel the need for intimate relations with people they don’t know. It’s been said that it’s better to know the person you’re going to fuck, instead of fucking without feeling; be it anger, be it love, Jarsaki like a little emotional investment. So the Brothel serves as a tourist attraction. Dean’s seen only Zhawai and Netherai people come in since the moment he started living there.

Once he’s inside of the forest, there’s no cold wind and a peaceful silence surrounds him, which Dean appreciates. The Red Ruby wriggles inside of his shirt, sending a burst of worry down the line. Dean rolls his eyes. “We’re going to avoid them,” he says out loud, sending images of wild Dragossi he’s seen to Red Ruby. “The rascals like living underwater, we’re walking around the lakes. They won’t smell you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

The Red Ruby huffs and squeaks, the worry even bigger now. Dean doesn’t know how to calm her down.

He knows how to deal with the wild ones. But how the hell do you deal with a gods-damned royal Dragossi? She doesn’t even eat meat.

Dean walks over the fallen trees, steps on glowing sap and leaves colorless footprints. The Red Ruby keeps changing her mind about the forest, sending various emotions through the line, sometimes
excitement, sometimes fear. Confusion. Fear again.

Hunger.

“We gotta get you back to your nest,” Dean says, patting the bundle of joy. “The Dragossi Whisperer will take care of you. I’m sorry for stealing you out of your home.”

The Red Ruby brushes her claws over his chest, painfully. The line feels strangely angry.

Even the villagers are afraid of walking through the forest at night. One of the girls from the Brothel he really likes has told him about the children-stealers, who took her brother away from her parents. Granted, she deems it the best thing to ever happen, because at least now her brother never has bruises. Dean has never seen a Laume, and he really hopes it stays that way.

Dean breathes in, the air sultry with the spicy smell of rotting leaves on the ground, yet there are no leaves in sight. The Red Ruby won’t calm down, thrashing against his chest, brushing wounds into his skin he can barely feel.

Dean’s never felt this tension in the forest before. Never even a single nervous response to however weird the forest looked. Not like this. Not like someone’s watching him from every corner of the giant glowing sap trees, or the moss beneath his feet. There’s an itch on his arm that doesn’t go away when he scratches it.

And then, the silence is deafening. Dean stops short.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing, but the thoughts in his head, and double the fear. The Red Ruby suddenly claws her way out of his shirt and armor, screeching loudly. Dean gets caught by surprise when the Red Ruby jumps up in the air and extends her small, black scaled wings. She flies forward, faster than he can catch her.

“Fuck!” Dean shouts, and breaks into a run.

If he doesn’t return her, they’ll track him down. If he doesn’t catch her in time, he’ll never buy Sam out of the Brothel, and Sam will have to face the Zhwai lands, will have to hear the forbidden language, will have to sit on his knees in front of a disgusting Zhwai man-

The Red Ruby is fast, flying in cheerful zigzags, constantly looking back if Dean’s even following her. “Stop!” Dean pleads, but instead of fear, he feels amusement within the line, a playful joy strumming deep inside. It’s not his. Not even remotely. Dean’s wide eyes are worried, chest tense, fingers shaking.

She’s going straight for the lake cluster, the one Dean always avoids at all costs.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It’s getting colder by the second, his breath turning to smoke. He ignores how quickly frost covers the ground beneath his toes, or how ice blossoms on his breeches. The ice doesn’t touch the Red Ruby.

“Claws, get fucking back here,” Dean manages to croak out, his throat suddenly hurting. The tips of his hair and eyelashes catch snowflakes. For a split second, Dean thinks about winter. The cold is too sudden, so different from every other winter he’s lived through.
Lady Winter, the Goddess who wants only to be alone, is hurrying, and who knows for what. Dean doesn’t think too much about it. He’s out of breath from running so fast, stumbling upon roots and holes in the ground.

Fuck, he’s going to have to catch the Red Ruby at the lake. Gods forbid they walk in on wild Dragossi while they’re sleeping. It’s so so so cold.

Dean slows down, the Red Ruby way ahead of him. He can’t voice his fears. His fingers are frozen. Fuck, he’s going to die if he doesn’t go back.

He runs through the trees, miscalculates the edge of the ground, and slips straight down the steep hill. One moment, he sees the Red Ruby floating in the air, red eyes looking at the lake, and serenity flows in Dean’s chest. The next, he hits the deep water, as blue as the sky in broad daylight, so clear you can’t possibly know how deep it actually is. Dean’s body goes rigid against the change of temperature; the blistering cold becomes heat, sending shockwaves down his body.

He sinks, and fast.
Castiel shakes the emeralds into Jarra’s mouth and lets her go up. She flies away, worry in her eyes, but the pull of safety is too strong. Castiel checks if he has the Dragossi whistle hanging around his neck, then pulls the second orb, colored in a light pink.

Kneeling on the ground, head bowed, he hits the orb down with his palm as if bouncing a ball. The orb shatters, leaving Castiel shrouded in a pink mist that seeps into his skin, chokes him as he breathes it in, lungs screaming out from lack of air.

When the pink mist dissipates, Castiel’s body and clothes adapt to the environment, making him invisible to every seeing eye. He coughs uncontrollably, adjusting to the clean oxygen of the forest, smelling the moss and ancient trees. The sharp, sudden cold hits his face, but Castiel’s armor is warm enough to keep him going. Cautious of every step, Castiel remembers where Jarra pointed with her tail, and walks in that general direction. He’s leaving footprints, but soon, they’re covered in snow.

Snow. Castiel loves every single thing about the cold, wintery kisses of frost. Instantly feeling better, he hurries forward, listening to the distinct lack of sound in the forest. It’s terrifyingly quiet.

There’s a faint blue light coming from the clearing of trees in front of Castiel, and he finds it wildly fantastical. The forest is much more beautiful than he remembers.

Castiel moves with the agility and speed of a fighter, easily jumping over debris. He reaches the clearing, and the view opens up to the clearest lake he’s ever seen. It’s ethereal, he can easily see to the bottom, colorful fish and corals lining up in neat rows, absolutely breathtaking. Castiel takes it all in with one glance, mouth open in an enlightened awe.

He climbs down the edge, carefully placing his feet in the right places. Falling would end in disaster, it’s already colder than anything he’s ever felt before. Imagine falling into water in winter. Once he climbs down, his feet settle into the dark sand, obviously Jarsaki. What’s interesting is that the sand lying in the bottom of the lake is beige, something Castiel’s only seen in Fean’s beaches.

Then, he notices that around him, everything’s frosting over, snowflakes fall down in elegant swirls. But the snow melts before touching the water. Castiel crouches down to tentatively touch the surface.

The water is warm, making his fingers tingle, the temperature far different from what it should be in this cold. Castiel’s confused, startled enough to raise his head and see the other side of the lake, not too far away, but far enough for him to see a figure. A dark-skinned, black haired figure, naked, and walking away from the lake, every step turning the ground white.

He’s breathing harshly, eyes widening with the realisation Castiel’s probably the only human in centuries to have witnessed Lady Winter in action. He wants to call out and pray to her, but she’s gone before he can open his mouth.

Everything happens in an instant.
There’s a swoop of wind, then a shadow of a small creature passes over Castiel, flying straight for the lake. Eyes focusing, Castiel witnesses the real, gorgeous Dragossi hatchling, black scales shining with blue streaks, reflecting the light from the water. The Red Ruby in its full glory, soaring through the mysterious aura of the lake, swooping past Castiel, naïve to his presence.

As the Red Ruby stops in mid-air, jaw open in a silent screech, Castiel registers another shadow, this time so much bigger and wider than the Red Ruby.

A body slams into the lake, causing a big wave to come and crash into Castiel. The pink dust latches onto the liquid, obviously liking it more than Castiel’s skin, leaving him half visible again wherever the water touches him.

This time, the Red Ruby turns and sees Castiel. Their eyes lock, blue to red, and before Castiel can throw one of his cage orbs, the Red Ruby lets out a heart-wrenching scream, body angled for a straight dive down, where the human body hit the water.

Castiel springs into action. An array of bubbles surround the area of the splash, but the person doesn’t come back up. It’s hard to tell how far Castiel has to dive to help the person, but Castiel quickly untucks his belt, the sword, his upper armor and shoes. He jumps head first into the water, a practiced grace lining his body.

It’s so much warmer than he originally thought. The blue surrounds all of him, sending him into a kind of silence he finds deafening. Smooth strokes, eyes open, and finally he sees the other person - a man - sinking face first, arms flailing weakly. Castiel swims with increased fervor, but clearly misjudges the deepness of the clear water. The man is so far away, sinking faster than Castiel can swim.

It can’t be. Water doesn’t work this way, it doesn’t change speed while sinking, he should be able to reach the man without wasting a breath. But here he is, picking up speed, yet unable to reach a drowning man.

On his right, the Red Ruby struggles in the water, clearly having no knowledge of swimming. The small hatchling has a set of four lungs, one storing air for long flights, so Castiel figures it’s going to take a minute or two for the Dragossi to lose consciousness.

The second turns into an unplanned, prolonged eternity, Castiel’s feeling his own lungs burst with the need for air. If he keeps going, he might save a man’s life. If he swims to the right, he saves the hatchling and makes Michael happy.

One, two, three-

Castiel swims down, hoping he has enough air in his lungs to pull up a grown body with him. The silence makes him sick to his stomach, and it’s hard to see through the water and the distorted light. His muscles scream in pain, and wasn’t the body much further away before? The man has stopped flailing, body frozen in time, sandy short blond hair flowing with the water. As Castiel wraps his arms around his torso, the man starts moving again, trying to shout, but everything comes out in bubbles. Castiel uses his legs to push up, dragging the man with him.

Castiel swears he’s seeing something from the corner of the eye, a flock of blonde hair and a flash of light reflecting from a shiny surface.

He suppresses the need to scream when he sees more shining eyes, surrounding him from every direction. The colors vary in size, the scales more diverse than the Dragossi in the Keep, but Castiel recognizes feral Dragossi in an instant. They’re all slowly slithering toward him and the man, who
finally moves. Castiel’s arms feel heavy, his chest stings with the lack of air, but when all of the feral Dragossi look down to the bottom of the lake, Castiel lets himself observe what catches their interest. He sees corals of all color and size, reminding him so much of a crown, but before he can piece out why there’s stone underneath all the nature and the Dragossi, he decides he doesn’t want to die just yet.

It takes all the power of Castiel’s soul to get the man out of the water, and when they breach through the surface, Castiel inhales, while the man starts coughing.

Castiel swims the last few strokes, and hauls both of them out of the water, and onto the black sand, falling down on his stomach, breathing heavily. The blond man slowly pushes himself up on the sand, arms shaking a little bit. Coughing out the water, the man looks over to Castiel, who’s about ready to pass out.

Castiel sees the green eyes, a constellation of freckles, and pouty lips. Beautiful.

Before he can say anything to the other, the man jumps in place, still shaky. He fumbles, holding out his hand for leverage. Half of his clothes are covered in dark sand.

“Claws?” he says, voice worried. It’s a deep, husky kind of tone.

Castiel furrows his brows. “What?”

“Claws,” the man repeats, standing up in a hurry. “The tiny Dragossi, the uh. The black, rowdy kind of hatchling.”

Castiel’s eyes narrow. His whole body shivers against the cold, the frost from the ground climbing up his feet.

The guy tenses, stopping to think about what just happened. His eyes flick toward Castiel, then to Castiel’s scattered royal armor, and the belt. Then, he raises his hands up in the air, dripping wet and shivering. “Whatever you’re thinking,” he says, holding eye contact with Castiel. “Whatever you’re realizing right now has an explanation, and I swear to all the Gods living in Jarsaki, I was about to return her.”

Castiel moves like a cat, one hand bracing against the ground, jumping up into a fighting position. His voice is raised, dangerous. “By the word of King Novak, you have stolen from the Keep of Patheo. You do know a crime like this is punishable by death?”

The guy shakes, face getting darker, his look defeated. “It’s why I’m trying to return her! C’mon, man, I really didn’t want to cause any harm-”

Castiel jumps forward, but the guy evades his attack with a simple twist. The surprise on his face doesn’t faze Castiel, because he lunges again.

A black shadow zooms past, hitting Castiel in the chest hard enough for him to stumble back.

An adorable roar comes from the most wonderful Dragossi Castiel has seen in his life. Its scales look tar black up close, polished enough so that Castiel can see his own reflection. The Red Ruby strikes him once, twice, scratches his face with its claws with such fervor, it’s hard to move away.

“Stop!” The man shouts, holding his hand out in a desperate attempt to help.

To Castiel’s wild luck, the Red Ruby stops, wings flapping up and down, its red eyes filled with determination. Castiel falls on his ass, the sand a painful cushion.
The lake remains a calm, blue mirror, illuminating the man and the Red Ruby. The man keeps shivering, the air coming out of his lungs turning to whisps of white. Winter takes no pity.

Castiel’s own hands are turning white, shaking slightly. Arresting the thief will be meaningless if it only means they die here. He’s still wondering how the hell the Red Ruby got out of the lake anyway?

The man opens his mouth, lips chapped. “Look,” he says, cautious. “I swear to Gods, I did not steal her to spite the King. I didn’t know I accidentally took a royal Dragossi out of a Green Tree nest, I can’t tell the eggs apart. If you let me return her to the King, and leave the country, I’ll never come back, never show my face to any Jarsaki. Do we have a deal?”

Castiel’s hand inches closer to his belt. “How do you know it’s a her?”

The Red Ruby snaps her jaw at him.

The man opens his mouth, but Castiel’s quicker. He grabs the sickly orange orb, and smashes it with both hands before blowing the dust on the thief and the Red Ruby. He closes his nose and mouth in case he’s going to breathe the dust in, but watches the scene unfold.

The Red Ruby, to Castiel’s amazement, puffs out coughs of fire, and ignores Castiel completely. With her last conscious moments, she flaps her wings, turning toward the blond man, and as he opens his arms to her, she weakly flies into his embrace. The man closes his eyes, lets out an exhale and falls on the ground with her like a sack of potatoes.

Castiel remains with his mouth wide open, sure now that Michael is going to kill all of them. Himself, Samandriel, and this complete stranger.

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Dean drifts in and out his dreams, sometimes seeing the woman with white flowing hair telling him how to swim up, sometimes blue eyes and dark curls in the middle of a cloud of orange. Every now and then, he feels tugging at the red line, so he playfully tugs back, getting only a burst of worry and relief whenever he responds.

He wakes up groggy, with his mouth dry. All of his muscles feel strained, and when he sits up in a bed under woolen covers, dressed in last night’s clothes, half of his arm bandaged, his heart beats faster.

Dean’s in a stone room, lit by a single starlight candle. This bed is wider than his bed at the Brothel and there is room for walking around, but no pitcher of water placed next to the bed. Remembering the forest and the Red Ruby, Dean throws the covers off. Far too warm, Dean welcomes the cold stone ground beneath his bare feet. Where the hell is he? Where’s the Red Ruby? What happened to the Royal Crow Guard?

He finds new linen clothing laid out on the edge of the bed, and redresses quickly. His old clothes are still sort of sickly wet, the bed has dark sand on it.

Dean tries to open the door. Doesn’t budge.

There’s no window, no opening, no clues as to where he could be. Dean’s slowly getting more
anxious, thinking firstly of Sam, then of the Red Ruby. His chest feels a little empty when she’s not clinging to his shirt.

A horrible longing fills up all of his senses, so he doesn’t hear the door open. Dean almost gets a heart attack when the dark haired man enters the room with a plate of food and water.

Dean’s ready to fight, but the man just looks at him and places the plate on top of the table in the corner of the room.

“You’re awake,” the man says.

Dean rolls his eyes internally. “Where the fuck am I?”

Blue eyes look him over, then he closes the door. Dean sees there’s only more stone outside.

“You’re in the Keep Dungeons. Eat.”

Dean looks at the food, then at the man. “No fucking way am I eating. Why am I here? Am I a prisoner? Where’s Claw-”

He stops himself. He’s not supposed to talk about the gods-damned Dragossi. Not when he’s probably going to end up dead for stealing it.

The man sighs. He’s dressed even worse than Dean, covered in discolored linen, and no shoes. His face looks tired. Even his shaking hands show how exhausted he must be. “Unfortunately, you and the Red Ruby will have to be separated for a while, until I figure out what to do with your bond.”

“Our bon-”

“Before I can offer you a deal I shouldn’t even be offering, can I at least know your name?”

Dean stays silent.

The man says, “Please. I’m not going to accuse you of stealing the egg. It’s just that I don’t work well with people I don’t know, and it’s even harder when I don’t even know your name.”

The silence is far from comfortable.

The Guard raises his eyebrows, lips a thin line. “I’m Castiel, if it makes you feel any better. I’m not your enemy, nor your warden. See, in a crazy turn of events, instead of dragging you to prison, I’m going to have to depend on us both working together. I can’t even begin to explain how important you’ve proven to be.”

Dean doesn’t trust him one bit. But one thing he knows. He gives respect where it’s deserved, and who could deserve more respect than the fucking Dragossi Whisperer standing in front of him? The vicious, unimaginably smart younger brother of the King, who doesn’t show himself at any public events, nor does he want to. He’s an enigma, a mystery, a secret kept very well by the entirety of the Keep. There’s been speculation about what he looks like, but not even close to what Dean’s seeing in front of him. It would’ve been hard to recognize him in a public setting, but hearing Castiel give his own name makes it laughably simple. He’s surprised, because Castiel is slender, lean, and almost as tall as Dean himself. Not the muscle mountain, scar ridden Prince everyone imagines him to be. Prince Castiel fucking Novak pulled him out of the lake, right when his dream was about to come true, right when the white haired woman came to help him. Dean’s heart finally calms, as Claws purrs a comforting Dragossi song down the line. A plan forms in his head, a crazy, stupid plan. But, a plan nonetheless.
Dean glares at him. “I’m not talking until I see my brother.”

A knock on the door surprises them both. Dean stares at Castiel, unmoving, silent. Castiel doesn’t release his gaze when he says, “Come in.”

The door opens. A very unpleasant man stands in the middle of the doorway, dressed all in royal dark armor contrasting wonderfully with his own dark skin. The man doesn’t greet Castiel as he should a royal, simply walks in and looks Dean up and down. “This the new recruit?”

Castiel crosses his arms on his chest, pointedly looking at Dean. “Yes,” he says. “I’ve come here to explain his apprenticeship. Do you mind leaving us alone, Gordon-”


Castiel inhales sharply through his nose. “He’s not here to be Michael’s slave. He’s here on my terms, I am in need of a Red Ruby expert.”


Dean watches the worry on Castiel’s face, sees Castiel’s fingers turn into fists. Okay. Whatever. Fuck. He saved his life.

“I do need Castiel’s knowledge,” Dean says, with a clear Salitian accent. “I’ve traveled far enough, and doesn’t the Prince outrank you? In my country, a Guard would never question the decision of a Prince.”

Gordon visibly tenses.

Dean continues, “Give King Michael my regards. Surely he’s heard of the Dragossi Master Joel? I’ve been sent to take care of the Red Ruby until the King himself decides she is ready for battle. The apprenticeship was Master Joel’s idea as well. Prince Castiel has my recommendation letter.”

Dean really hopes Gordon can’t see through his shit.

Castiel clears his throat and says, “Joel Nathigard is very concerned about King Michael’s purchase.”

“I see,” Gordon says, still burning, but not as bad. “I’m sure you know about the disappearance of the Red Ruby, then?” he continues, eyes narrowed.

Dean nods. “Prince Castiel located it this morning, I believe. A great Master will always get a Dragossi home.”

Gordon raises his eyebrows.

Castiel hurries to explain, “I’ve written a report to King Michael himself. If you’d like to review its contents, I may give you a copy-”

“No need,” Gordon spits out. Holding eye contact with Dean, he turns around, and says, “Have a nice stay, apprentice - what’s your name?”

Dean thinks long and hard about all of the Dragossi masters in Salitia. Remembers Sam reciting them to him, the dead legends. “Evia. Evia Hvai, of the Salitian Dragossi Guild.”

Gordon nods along, and smiles again. “Pleased to meet you, Apprentice Evia.”
The door closes, and his heavy set steps fade into a distance. The confidence creeps Dean out. Castiel releases an anxious breath, wiping his palms down his breeches. “Evia? Seriously? He’s been dead for at least 200 years.”

“How are they going to find out?” Dean asks. He grabs the plate of food and sits down on the bed. “It’d take months for them to get the documentation. Traveling to Salitia would be half the job, considering how many Dragossi masters sit on their asses underneath Joel’s wing.”

Castiel gapes at him. “How in the fuck does a thief who can’t even distinguish royal eggs from plain eggs know Salitian Dragossi regulations?”

“My brother. Now that I’ve risked my ass for you and your goddamn atrocious plan, we’ve got a deal to discuss.”

“Your brother?” the Prince asks.

“Sam,” Dean says, hurriedly. “If you pay four rings to Fergus Crowley, the owner of the Rathi village Rose Brothel, I’m going to agree to whatever the fuck you’re going to ask me to do. I’ll give you my name, the last of my belongings, my arms, my life, anything. Get my brother out of there, and I’m yours.”

Castiel doesn’t seem impressed. “Four rings? Your brother must be worth something if this Crowley is asking for so much.”

Dean stands his ground. “He’s well-read. Handsome. Young. Zhwai would pay twice the price to get him to be a Jarsaki sex slave in their fucking castles.”

The Prince tenses when Dean mentions Zhwai. Nobody likes thinking of the cursed country. Zhwai have caused more than enough Great Wars over the years, always craving to increase their power, however unnecessary. In the olden times, when Zhwai people learned from the stars, their leaders dealt with dark magic. They did the unimaginable - instead of offering parts of their body, or their soul, they offered their language. Cursing all of their people with disgusting words, they’re the most feared race in Seratonia.

“Four rings and you’re going to agree to anything I ask of you?” Castiel says softly.

Dean nods. “Set Sam free, get him here, and I’m forever in your debt.”

The Prince, the rumored Dragossi Whisperer, stands dressed in plain, absolutely ridiculous clothing, his feet dirty from the stone, as he considers Dean’s plea. Dean, who doesn’t own a penny to his name, can barely read a sentence, and has learnt only what his brother has taught him, stands in front of a gods-damned Prince, firmly dictating the terms of his bargain. He is a brothel slave, with nothing to offer, he must be out of his mind.

Castiel removes a knife from his linen pocket, making Dean squirm. What he does next is unimaginable. He grabs a curl, slices it off, and extends it to Dean. For a moment Dean stops breathing.

A deal. A truthful, real deal. No royal would ever give their hair over to a peasant, none would ever let a poor man even touch them, and here Castiel is giving him the highest respect-worthy deal.

Dean accepts the piece of hair into his shaking hand, and quickly drags a thumb down his nose and lips.

Castiel says, “Keep it safe. I will send a Guard to the Brothel, and get your brother here.”
Dean stares at the hair in his hand, thinking that he won’t be able to run away from this. What is he going to do about Crowley? One end of the bargain may be done, but Dean still has to go to Zhwai at the end of the month. Fuck. One problem at a time.

“A deal is a deal. You’ll get everything from me once Sam is here.”

Castiel nods. “You’re free to roam around the Keep until Friday, but please do not leave the grounds. You have my word, I’d like you to keep yours.”

When Castiel’s gone, Dean places the hair underneath his pillow for safe-keeping.

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Castiel’s dressed for the occasion, in his royal attire, fit to meet the King and his goons. Castiel really hates meetings, especially ones that concern telling an intricate lie to his brother (and King’s) face. Samandriel’s left to deal with a very angry Red Ruby, which makes Castiel worry even more. The faster he can get Fake Evia’s brother, the quicker they can discuss what to do with the gods-damned bond.

Castiel enters through the giant oak doors that are decorated with huge rubies and topaz carvings. Michael likes the luxury of having useless doors.

The Crow Guards announce him as he walks, not one of them kneeling to greet him. It doesn’t matter to Castiel, but it matters to Michael, who is very much against any respect shown toward his brothers and sisters. Even if they’re royal, Michael considers them little more than dust.

The Royal Hall is filled with garish decorations, all an unmaching mess to Castiel’s eyes. A giant table in the middle of the Hall is covered with flowers, enchanted with alchemy to smell and look alive, when in reality, they’re as good as dead. Piles upon piles of gems encrust the walls, blinding anyone who enters. Castiel is used to the glitter but he fucking hates it.

Michael’s sitting on his throne at the end of the table, with Gordon, and - Castiel’s heart clenches for her - Anna.

She looks breathtaking, naked except for the translucent coat on her shoulders. The coat is made from very expensive silk, with gold embroidery hiding her most private parts. Whenever she moves even just a little bit, the gems on the coat shine brightly. Castiel instantly recognizes the glow - it’s the Heart of a Giant, smashed into little pieces, to make a cloth. So cruel, to steal a Heart from a Giant that once lived, and have the audacity to make it into a useless coat.

She looks at him, instantly relieved he even came.

Michael nods over at the chair on the other end of the table. A mile away. Castiel sits.

“Is my Red Ruby home?” he asks, swirling wine in his gold-silver chalice.

Castiel bows his head slightly. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Castiel can’t see Michael’s face, or how he’s reacting, in fear of him breaking Castiel’s bones.

Michael smacks his lips after drinking from the chalice. “Did you catch the thief?”

Castiel breathes in nervously, then raises his head, but doesn’t meet Michael’s eyes. “Yes. He has
been taken care of. I have brought his head with me.”

That he did. He found a man, dead from Torap, the disease widespread among the poor of Patheo. Without the right medication, you’re dead within days of horrible pain. Many resort to stealing to get the medicine from Medics. A perfect explanation for the Red Ruby.

Michael nods over to Gordon, and says, “Did you see the head?”

Gordon makes himself comfortable in his seat, smiling viciously. “Ah yes, a petty thief, head cut straight off,” he says, theatrically. “My King, did you know? Dear Castiel brought a Red Ruby Master as an apprentice!”

Michael stays silent. Waiting.

Castiel hurries to explain himself. “Salitian born Evia Hvai. He’s serving under Master Joel, the man who sold you your very own Red Ruby.”

Michael won’t know either way. He asked Castiel to get him a Red Ruby, and didn’t care how Castiel did it. Castiel contacted Master Joel a full year ago for an egg.

Michael feigns knowledge. “Ah. Yes, Master Joel is an honorable man. Does this Evia Hvai have a recommendation letter from Master Joel?”

Castiel swallows his fear. “Yes. Would you like to see the documentation of Evia’s transportation?”

Michael waves it off. “No. I would like to meet this Red Ruby master. Arrange for him this Friday.”

“Yes, my King,” Castiel says, heart beating extremely fast in his chest. “Here?”

“Yes,” Michael says, and Gordon never lets his eyes down from Castiel, suspicious. “With the Red Ruby. You’re dismissed.”

Castiel shares a look with Anna. Her eyes are painted a sparkly gold, which he knows she hates. Being born a Goddess in this family has made her into a slave. Castiel’s been trying to visit her when he can, just to help her deal with Michael’s tantrums. Anna considers her healing powers a curse. Castiel doesn’t blame her.

He bows down, and leaves the Hall with no comments.

Hopefully Samandriel will be back from his trip to Patheo’s slums, with a brand new fake Salitian recommendation letter. Castiel’s palms are sweaty as he descends down the Giant’s stairs. He wonders whether the Giant felt pain when men carved the stone into rooms, Halls and dungeons. He hopes the Giant can forgive them.

***

Dean gets lost three times while trying to leave the Keep. It’s an impossible task with all of these corridors, the gems distracting him from finding his way out, blinding him. All of that time he spends worried about Sam, and the Brothel itself. Surely, Crowley’s going to make Sam do all of the work when he finds out Dean’s gone. Dean would write a letter, but embarrassingly, he can’t write. Nor read. Fuck. How is he going to do this?
First off, he really needs to find a way out. If Sam’s going to come to the Keep, they’re going to prepare themselves for a long trip to whatever country is going to accept them. Sam’s smart, he can work anywhere. And Dean. Well. He knows the ins and outs of a Brothel, he could easily find a job as a servant, or even maybe a clerk. If Sam teaches him how to read and write on the way there.

Dean’s avoiding other Keep servants, who greet him as an Apprentice. It’s wildly weird being treated as sort-of royalty. Dean’s back straightens when he’s around people, and he subtly interrogates them for every exit they know. He’s met with confused looks and shrugs.

Dean eats in the Kitchens, chatting up the maids, and the cook. He learns that Benny’s a true Lafallka man, indifferent to Jarsaki darkness. He’s dressed in a blinding blue parka, with golden embroidery on the shoulders.

“You Salitian?” Benny asks when he serves a giant bowl of the best broth Dean’s ever eaten. “Been there before. Worked as a gods-damned chef for your army. Never fucking again. You ever serve?”

Dean shakes his head, wolfing the broth down. He tries remembering Sam’s stories again. “Not yet 25.”

“Ah,” Benny hums. “Still a youngling, eh? Not ready for blood and the art of war, I take it.”

“I’d rather avoid war altogether,” Dean says, thinking of taking Sam to a calm village with a library, perhaps. Somewhere far away from all of this political bullshit, without countries standing on very thin agreements.


Dean has no idea who Bear is. He’s heard rumors about Saswoye, the tribe of people who have never touched the ground with their feet, living in high waters. “I hear you. Can I have some more broth?”

Benny refills his bowl with a smile.

Dean can’t sleep that night, Sam’s face lingering behind his eyelids, and that bright red line trembling with anxiety and longing. Dean’s starting to miss the little hatchling too.
Samandriel is shoveling Dragossi dung out of one the nests, with the male Tree Green Dragossi practically inhaling water from the pool. “You’re crazy, and I’m going to regret staying with you,” he hisses under his breath.

Castiel’s writing in his notebook, observing the nest and its changes. The Tree Green teenager is almost ready for breeding, obvious by the way the male keeps scratching his nest into pieces, then rearranging it back again to make a softer bedding for his potential lover.

“You’re under oath to keep my secrets. Considering I’m letting a thief live with us and learn the trade, it’s in your best interests to shut up and help me save us all from getting brutally murdered by my brother.”

Samandriel huffs as he shovels another round into the cart. “Why are you even letting him stay here? You could easily hang him for stealing from the King.”

“I’ve already told you,” Castiel lies through his teeth. “The guy is a Red Ruby expert.”

“Then why the hell does he need to learn the trade?”

“He kind of lied he’s Master Joel’s apprentice. If Gordon didn’t come see him, I would have told Michael I’d found him in the slums. Lied about his father having a rare book on Dragossi or something. Instead I was forced to assure Michael that our thief was sent by Master Joel. To learn Jarsaki Dragossi handling regulations.”

“You lied? You.”

“What was I supposed to say? The thief told Gordon he’s from Salitia. Called himself Evia.”

Samandriel drops his shovel. “He’s in every fucking Dragossi history book! You’re mad.”

Castiel waves everything off. “Michael hates history.”

Samandriel picks up the shovel and points at Castiel angrily. “Gordon reads. If he finds out, we’re doomed.”

Castiel levels him with a look. “If he finds out, I’ll take the fall. You take the hatchlings and run. Like always.”

Samandriel rolls his eyes. “Like always.”

They’ve had multiple close calls throughout the years already. Castiel could probably stop reminding Samandriel what they’d need to do in a moment of danger, but he doesn’t. The worry in his chest never lets him forget to tell him. But Samandriel doesn’t complain - too much.

Castiel ends his notes with a dot, closes the book and leaves the nest area. He’s got close to twenty
fully-grown Dragossi under his care, and more than 50 that range from hatchlings-to-teenagers.
Castiel thinks about the mysterious thief, and him almost drowning. He’s arranged for a Guard to bring the thief’s brother back to the Keep, which makes his chest tense with worry. What if Michael finds out the thief has bonded with the Red Ruby? Castiel’s seen all the signs. The Red Ruby, a magnificent female, is currently locked in a small nest of her own with no other contact. She thrashes against the walls whenever he brings her gems to eat, screeching bloody murder. It’s not her nest. Her nest is somewhere deep within the Keep, wandering the Halls. Castiel’s spies follow him around everywhere, reporting to Castiel whenever they can.

How the hell does a Brothel boy bond with a royal Dragossi?

Castiel hears Samandriel swearing loudly. He decides to go through all of the Red Ruby books to search for an answer. Maybe he’s going to find a way to break the bond, and won’t need to lie to Michael anymore.

Walking in through the storage, there are three plain wooden doors, two of them leading to the gem vaults, designed specifically for feeding Dragossi. Castiel oversees the harvest every year, traveling as far as Salitia, to the famous Juviari forests. Lord Juviar has always been the greatest provider, affiliating with any country that had the money to afford a precious resource of only the highest grade gems for feeding their Dragossi. Not all Dragossi eat gems or solid rocks, but the ones Castiel breeds underneath the Keep have a very serious diet, per Michael’s request.

Behind the third door, Castiel’s most precious, is his personal library. Large enough for a comfortable fur-lined chair, but smaller than an Inn room. It holds all the secrets Castiel has gathered throughout the years of being a Dragossi Master, with books as old as, for example, Evia Hvai, the deceased Dragossi Master, a man who discovered how to extract precious Dragossi blood from the very rare Golden Dragossi. Castiel’s never even seen one, and this man had a pack in his hand-built nests. All that's left now are the paintings of him standing in the middle of many very happy Dragossi with translucent scales and gold running through their veins.

The Golden Dragossi are all but extinct, save for the rumors about Nethereal. But who knows these days, with Nethereal’s walls and their batshit crazy Emperor. Castiel avoids thinking about Nethereal in general.

Castiel drags down one of the newer hardbacks, fish-skin covers making his fingers itch. Sitting down in the run-down chair, he opens up the book, tracing the cursive words with his finger.

Red Ruby. Descended from the original Three Dragossi, the ever first Bonded Dragons. There’s a wonderful pencil drawing of the Three Riders, women with hidden faces. It’s been over a thousand years since the First War ended, and the three women remain faceless to this day. There’s millions of books all over Seratonia, depicting their bravery, the pact they had made with the countries that don’t exist anymore. Castiel had seen their statue in Salitia, when he went to procure the Red Ruby. The statue was made from the stones taken from the Whisper Mountains lying behind Jarsaki and Nethereal. It’s been said the mountains were home to the Three Dragossi and their Riders.

The Red Ruby hatchling, unfortunately, comes from a horde of four Dragossi, all ferocious and very loyal to their King. Castiel shivers remembering how much of the Keep’s money Michael spent on his very own Red Ruby.

He skips through some of the pages, but there’s no real way to break a bond between a Royal Dragossi and a simple man. Castiel closes the book with a loud thump, and thinks.

Tomorrow, he’ll talk to the thief, he tells himself. Maybe everything will be alright.
Dean wakes up choking on air, his skin on fire, and the linen chafing his skin. Throwing off the covers, he paces around the stone room, delirious.

The screams in his head are getting louder, loud enough for him to grab his head with both of his hands and grunt in pain. The line inside of him vibrates with such intensity, Dean’s about to pull his hair out, falling down on his knees and shouting his voice hoarse into the ground.

Vaguely, he understands it’s Claws. Something’s wrong, she’s in trouble, she’s hurting-

Dean gets up, and, throwing the door open, runs.

The corridors are dimly lit by starlight candles, but Dean doesn’t need to remember the intricate turns, the rooms with fancy doors. He closes his eyes for a single second, and smells the red line. It’s so overwhelming, his head swims as his feet carry him forward.

He takes three turns. Finds barely lit stairs made out of stone, the same ones he used to get to the Kitchens, though this time he bypasses them completely. Dean goes down, into the darkness of the dungeons that he dared not enter yesterday.

The pull is so strong, he ignores the cold of the dungeon tunnel, the rapid cooling of his sweaty skin. There’s a red curtain at the end of the tunnel and he pushes past it without care, crashing through a few raggedy chairs and nearly falling on top of a clustered table. There’s a surprised shout from someone who’d been sitting at the table, but Dean’s vision is clouded.

Dean’s blood pounds in his ears as he roars when someone grabs his arm. He yanks it out of their grip, stumbling on uneven ground, his fingers brushing against the stone. Dean’s seeing pulsing red in front of him, a beacon for him to follow. The distress call is getting stronger with each breath he takes.

Completely forgetting where he is and what he’s doing, he half-crawls, half-runs towards his destination, oblivious to anything around him. Going through a set of smaller corridors too small for him, he finds an iron door, big enough for half of a person like him. Dean claws at the door until his fingers bleed, loudly calling out to the Red Ruby.

There’s a person behind him, and then the door opens just a smidge. Dean bursts through, and finds himself reaching for the end of the line, when it comes stumbling into his waiting hands.

An explosion of joy courses through his veins, both Claws and his own. Tears stream down Dean’s face, and suddenly, he’s sobbing. The little Dragossi can’t stop herself from wriggling in Dean’s hands, puffing pockets of heated air, whining with happiness. She clings to his wet and cold shirt, and Dean gradually becomes warm all over.

He’s breathing hard, vision finally clearing as he calms down. Dean’s mouth feels sandy, dry as the deserts of the Whisper Mountains.

A calm, collected voice comes from the corridor. “I should have known keeping you apart would end like this.”

Dean brushes the tip of his nose on the Red Ruby’s head, and she practically purrs. He doesn’t care
about Castiel and his fucking concern. Now that he’s collected his thoughts, his mind circles around the word **Friday.** “Where’s Sam?” His words are fuzzy.

Castiel crawls inside of the nest, then kneels in front of them. His cheek is bruised. “It’s very early in the morning. He should be here by noon.”

“Alright,” Dean says, exhausted. He somehow trusts that Castiel’s telling the truth. Claws is already asleep. He says, slurring, “I’m going to pass out.”

Before Castiel can say anything else, Dean falls into the nest and everything becomes dark.

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Castiel leaves the thief and the Red Ruby asleep, placing a basket of gems for the hatchling, and some fruit for the man. Hurrying, he returns to his own quarters above the dungeons and below the kitchens, through one of the secret doors he’s installed himself. His room is sparse; the walls are decorated in Dragossi sketches, his bedding a warm brown color with none of the embroidery typically favoured by Jarsaki royals. His clothing is scattered across the floor, some of it hanging neatly in a silver closet. Nobody ever comes here. There’s no warmth, or lain-in covers, just cold walls surrounding a lonely man.

Castiel briefly remembers the thief, how he passed out with his linen shirt hitching up, revealing something Castiel has only seen once before in his life. Markings, made not by hand, but from birth. Putting his trust in the underlying rumor that had circulated through Jarsaki ever since he could remember, Castiel acts fast.

Castiel grabs his royal armor, dressing up efficiently, like a soldier should. It takes no time to leave his room, and run over to the Guard barracks on the other side of the Keep. Castiel catches the Guard he hired to take the thief’s brother from the Brothel as he’s about to leave.

Castiel hands him fifteen half-rings. “I’m freeing you from your duties. Go get piss-drunk in town or do whatever you want with the rings. Don’t hush a word of this to your superiors, because I’ll know and I will feed your lifeless body to my Dragossi.”

The Guard gapes at the half-rings in his hand. They could buy him a summer house on a private beach, far away from Jarsaki. Their eyes meet. “A word about what?” he says, faking surprise. Castiel knows the Guard will leave the country and never come back with the amount of money he’s got on his hands.

Castiel taps him on the shoulder. “Good man. Off you go.”

The Guard, to Castiel’s surprise, pauses. Then, drags his thumb down his nose, to his chin. The way you’d greet a King.

When he leaves, Castiel prays for his safety, for if Michael knew, none of them would live to see the next day. None of them will live if Michael finds out about the fucking bond between the thief and the royal Dragossi, either.

So Castiel hurries down to his dungeons again, finds Jarra, and buckles her up. He has to be back before Samandriel wakes up and finds the thief in the Red Ruby’s nest.
Jarra is quite happy to fly out once again, nuzzling her head to Castiel’s waist. He feeds her, then leads her out to the waterfall. Using the sand-wall orb, he remains dry even after they’ve flown through the spray.

Despite the early hour, the city below is already awake. Castiel knows talk about him riding a Dragossi over the forest will definitely reach Michael’s ear, but he can worry about that later. For now, he worries about Jarra and her fear of the forest.

As she trembles when they enter the dangerous air-flow above the forest, he urges her to go faster. She complies.

Castiel thinks about how hard it must’ve been for her to answer his call when he caught the thief and the hatchling. She refused to fly closer to the lake, opting to screech for Castiel further away. Castiel had to drag the thief all the way to Jarra, through freezing temperature.

Today is not so bad. There’s no snow in sight, and the cold doesn’t feel like it’s stabbing him. Only the bruise on Castiel’s face stings a little bit. When the thief came crashing into the Dungeons, Castiel’s table had been left in shambles. A flying book hit him in the face in the display of elevated strength. Castiel has never seen such power in a bond host.

The Rathi village isn’t much of a village. Its location is a perfect pit stop for resting, or leaving goods for Patheo. Rathi people use their houses for commerce, rather than actually living there. Multiple Patheo rich folk come here to arrange their shops, so as not to ask any of their customers to cross the forest, or travel the long way around, to enter the city without any danger.

Castiel asks Jarra to land near the village, leaving her in a meadow with a pile of gems to eat. He doesn’t want to scare the villagers.

He finds an old, richly dressed woman sitting outside of a very fancy black-stone house, her maid using an alchemically infused stone cylinder to heat up the area around her. The heat is very welcoming. Castiel’s frozen fingers get warmer as he asks about the Brothel. He gets a side-eye from the lady, but when Castiel explains he’s going there on behalf of the King, she quickly offers her help, telling the maid to show him the way.

The Brothel stands in the middle of Rathi, red-colored bricks decorated with rainbow glitter. It looks out of place, standing in between dark Jarsaki houses. Castiel thanks the maid for her kindness, and hands her a full ring as a thanks. Her eyes fill with tears when he waves goodbye. Castiel barely spends any of his money, which makes this task even easier. He’s got more than enough to shut everyone up today, especially with what he’s about to do.

Castiel approaches the always open doors of the Brothel, with various winter flowers decorating the entrance. Walking inside, more glitter follows, and he finds himself standing in the middle of a very colorful Hall, filled with tables of food and drinks, clients sitting with their beautiful escorts. The uproar quickly dies down. Castiel looks like a Crow Guard, a very handy distraction from the fact he’s royal. It’s still a weird thing to see a Guard in a Brothel, especially in Jarsaki. Castiel doesn’t see any Jarsaki people among the clients. He recognizes a few Salitians and Nethereans, with their darker skin and sharp features, their clothing wildly different from Jarsaki black. A Zhwai man sits on his right, eyes gray as a storm, hair trailing past his feet, brushing the ground. He doesn’t speak, even if his escort murmurs something in his ear.

Castiel clears his throat, and puts his hands behind his back. “By the order of the King, I am here to speak to Fergus Crowley.”

A free escort, dressed far more nicely than anyone else, comes hurrying. She carries a pitcher of
honey wine. “Sir Crowley is busy at the moment, would you care for some wine while you wait?”

Castiel holds up a hand in denial. She gives the pitcher to another escort. “I’m afraid the matter of my business is too urgent to ignore.”

She bites her brightly red lip. “Sir Crowley is really busy—”

Castiel levels her with a look. “Is Sir Crowley above the law?”

The escort bows down, and shares a look with one of her friends, who is sitting next to a very shady looking Netherean. The friend stands up, his hair perfectly combed, with glimmering mirror gems woven into his hair. He’s dressed in a sheer dress that reaches his ankles, with embroidered birds at his chest and loins. He’s breath-taking enough that Castiel’s chest hurts even looking at him.

“I shall take you to him,” the man says, smiling cunningly. His customer reaches out for his hand, but the escort slaps it away without so much as a glance. “Follow me, Crow Guard.”

Castiel nods, and walks with the escort.

Castiel’s never been inside of a Brothel before. Like any other Jarsaki, Castiel’s not used to being intimate with anyone he doesn’t already have a connection with. The escort is lovely, but Castiel doesn’t feel any heat crawling below his stomach. The escort catches him looking. He smiles, teeth white, lips cherry red. Castiel can’t tell where he’s from. “I’m fairly expensive, Crow. Your salary is not nearly enough.”

Castiel shakes his head, impassive. “I am not looking for what you’re offering.”

“Ah,” the escort says. “How it wounds me. A man of your power would be a delight to serve. Has anyone told you your eyes are ethereal?”

Castiel’s more interested in the decorated walls now. “Yes.”

“Then you shouldn’t be surprised I’ve taken an interest.”

“You are not the first,” Castiel says.

The escort gasps theatrically. His skin is an ashy brown, oiled up with chunky glitter. When he moves, he looks like art. Castiel can’t deny his beauty, but feels nothing, save for mild interest in where this man came from. “Of all you Crows, I have fucked a few. None of them as self-centered as you. Aren’t you supposed to have less sarcasm? Or do you speak to your King like that?”

As the escort turns to go back to the Hall, Castiel takes a breath, and asks, “What is your name?”

The escort stops, then looks at Castiel, eyes heavy-lidded with long dark eyelashes. “Pleasure, sweetheart. They call me Pleasure.”
When Pleasure leaves, Castiel ignores the urge to talk to him more, and knocks on the door.

No answer.

Castiel knocks. Then knocks again.

The urgency of getting the thief’s brother to the Keep is stronger than any embarrassment Castiel’s feeling. He rapidly knocks on the door, until the door opens, a shorter, more round man staring right at him. Then, at his armor.

Eyes narrowing, the man says, “I’ve paid my taxes fair and square. Good day,” and he tries to close the door, but Castiel slips a shoulder in, stopping him.

“I am here to pay four rings for one of your Brothel boys. Sam.”

The man, obviously Crowley from his official attire, lifts up an eyebrow. “Did Dean suck your dick for the rings? I’m afraid you are too late.”

Castiel’s heart sinks. “What do you mean I’m too late?”

Crowley opens up the door wider, revealing a huge room, with a round table in the middle. Castiel’s only seen a table like this in paintings. A golden chair stands on top of the table, covered in expensive Laffalkan silks, shimmering in the dim lights. A boy, younger than Castiel imagined, sits naked, head bowed down, sobbing.

And there are Zhwai men, six of them, with piles of rings in front of them, glaring at Castiel for interrupting their bidding process. Their eyes are slits, veins pulsing black underneath their skin. It dawns on Castiel that they’ve been talking amongst one another. If not, the black magic wouldn’t show.

Crowley’s smug smile does it for Castiel. A flash of pity, and burning anger goes through Castiel. Quickly, he lifts up one of the lapels of his armor, showing three full leather pouches to Crowley.

“I can offer three times more for this boy.”


Castiel breathes in. “500 full rings.”

Crowley’s mouth opens. That’s worth an entire fucking flotilla of ships.

“300 more for Dean. Is he Sam’s brother?”

Crowley turns to the Zhwai men, and says, “Do give us a moment. The boy is sold. I shall invite our second male auction offer in a few minutes.”

The boy, Sam, raises his wet eyes to meet Castiel’s, shock evident on his face. The Zhwai are a little disappointed, but Castiel knows they’d never jeopardize a fair purchase. Not really fair on Castiel’s part, as he just spent a 1000 years of a Guard’s salary on a thief and his brother.

Crowley gets him out of the room, leaving poor Sam with the Zhwai. Castiel’s about to punch Crowley and get the boy, when Crowley shuts the door, and both of them stand in the corridor.

“What the fuck are you thinking?” Crowley says, hissing.

“I’m buying off two valuable men.” Castiel furrows his brows.
Crowley snorts. “Valuable, he says. Excuse my wording, Your Highness, but Dean and Sam are worth fucking shit.”

Castiel tenses. “How did you know?”

“That you’re a Prince? Or that Sam and Dean are worth shit?”

“...that I’m a - a Prince.”

Crowley gestures at him vaguely. “The attire does not fool a good eye. I’ve dealt with your apprentice once or twice, he’s painted a beautiful picture about you in words I would describe as honorary.”

“Samandriel? What business may he have with a Brothel owner?”

Crowley stares at him for a second. “What am I, a snitch? Ask him yourself.”

Castiel puts his hands on his hips, biting his lip nervously. “Alright. I’m buying off these two men. Should I give you the rings now?”

“I deal according to the law.. Documentation needs to be filled for me to be a legitimate owner, not a slaver.” Crowley shakes his head.

Castiel gets the leather pouches off him, and tosses them to Crowley. “Another 100 full rings for you to stay silent about this.”

Staring at the pouches in his arms, Crowley retorts, “What’s a Prince got to do with two Brothel boys?”

Castiel doesn’t so much as smile. “They’re the Keep’s boys now.”

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There’s shuffling in his arms, scales uncomfortably brushing against his fingers. Dean groans, opening up one eye.

“Do I look like a scratch post to you?” he says to Claws, who is happily nuzzling into him.

Dean’s head hurts big time, but he remembers last night clearly. The overwhelming power surging through him, the wish to protect the little Dragossi with his life, and the sheer joy he felt when he found her alive.

The nest, made out of leaves, hay and various branches isn’t the best place for sleep. Dean’s entire back hurts from laying on his side the whole time, so he releases Claws before sitting up and stretching. Instantly, she jumps around the nest, then settles next to a pile of precious gems. Rubies, Dean recognizes.

Claws grabs one, loudly breaking it in half with her tiny teeth.

“Hey!” Dean hurries, but Claws just looks at him with her red eyes, chewing the gem. “Wait. Is this what you eat?”
The line vibrates with delight. Dean’s leaning on his hand, eyes widening in surprise.

“You’re a little different than the Dragossi in the forest.”

He senses fear, but it’s more like fear of a superior, rather than the unknown. Claws eats more, when she senses Dean’s noticed his own fruit bowl.

Living in a Brothel, Dean hasn’t had a lot of opportunities to eat fresh fruit. What he got was various scraps from the kitchen, which he shared with Sam. Dean’s body is lean, a little malnourished, but functioning. Dean avoids looking at his own body, the darker markings scaring him to the point where he hasn’t shown his naked body to anyone in years. Sam’s seen Dean’s back in the baths, but never the markings on his legs. Dean hides them with a towel. They’re not hideous, far from that - Dean’s afraid of all the incredibly detailed lines and swirls. They kind of remind him of Claws’ scales, but he doesn’t think too far into it right now. He thanks all of the Gods in Patheo in a silent prayer for the juicy apple he’s eating.

The nest door is open, so he decides it’s time to go outside. Dean thinks about a million things at once, but the Red Ruby calms him down through their line. She looks like a lost puppy when he almost crawls through the opening.

Pausing, Dean sighs, and opens up his shirt. She squeaks, and slithers inside, her sharp claws hanging onto the fabric. Dean feels proud she’s learning how to navigate herself without causing him pain.

Dean doesn’t remember the corridor being this small which explains his bloody knuckles and knees. Careful not to hurt himself any further, Dean exits the nest. Outside, he finds a huge area, divided into smaller cubes, all filled with Dragossi. They’re interested in him now that he’s shown his face. A Dragossi half his size in a nest in front of him sniffs at the air, then loses interest, puffing a cloud of smoke through their nostrils.

Claws sends him encouragement to explore.

Dean had been here a few days ago, but it was too dark to see anything specific at the time. He sends his memories to Claws, who is more than excited to find out how she met him. Crowley had extensive knowledge of the Keep, and told Dean about a secret entrance through one of the Giant’s toes, which he had found no problem. The hardest part was finding an egg he could carry out in silence. It’s how he stumbled inside of a Tree Green Dragossi nest. He thinks about how strange it had been, when the beautiful adult Dragossi had nosed at the egg, and practically handed it to him. The Dungeons had been silent that day. Until he triggered the alchemical alarm system, sealing the only entrance he knew. He finds the same covered hole now, but this time, it’s filled with filed-down stone.

Claws is amused. Dean is not.

Dean grew up hearing about the Dungeons of the Keep, built deep inside of the Giant. He was 13 when Prince Castiel Novak has been appointed as the new Dragossi Master, after the death of his teacher. At the age of twenty, Castiel Novak had already made a name for himself throughout Seratonia, by bonding with one of the rare, extremely difficult to tame Dragossi. The Storm Dragossi has been in the Keep ever since it was a hatchling, but Bobby Singer could not tame it for the life of him. Storms happened whenever the Dragossi made a fuss, and once Castiel became the Dragossi Master, he did the unimaginable. He bonded with the Storm Dragossi. The storms continued, but not as vicious as before. Dean used to sit in the kitchen, listening to the cooks talk about all the rumors and chatter from the royal quarters. The head cook, Fran, had told him that bonding with a Dragossi takes determination. Extensive knowledge. A pure heart. Dean hadn’t cared enough then, but seeing
how well-cared for the Dragossi are now, he has the urge to find out what Castiel Novak is made of.

Dean’s turning 24 this year, and nobody knows what happened to the Storm Dragossi, as the storms stopped five years ago. Castiel doesn’t show his face in any public settings, and even though people are still curious, he’s a mystery even to the Keep. Dean’s gathered enough in the kitchens talking with Benny.

The Red Ruby peeks through the shirt, and the Dragossi they pass call out to her as if she’s a friend. Claws purrs at them all, equivalent to a dog wagging its tail. Even Dean knows that much.

Walking around, Dean finds loads of bags filled with gems; diamonds, rubies, emeralds, crystals. Shovels, ropes, hay - everything you might need to take care of a Dragossi. While looking for the exit he vaguely remembers, Dean is distracted by the blue rippling on the walls and the curious sound of running water drumming in his ears. What he finds there hits the air out of his lungs, at least fifteen Dragossi are gathered near a small lake, guzzling water down their magnificent necks. A few of them stop to investigate the visitor, but the others ignore Dean completely.

There’s a man standing in the middle of all the Dragossi, his hands raised in the air. He’s dressed a little better than the Prince, with thigh high boots made for walking in deep waters. He’s not in the water exactly, but looks almost serene surrounded by sound and calm Dragossi giants.

Dean blinks a few times, slowly backing up. The man looks like he’s in a deep ritual. But before Dean can leave the weird scene, Claws wriggles out of his shirt and flies.

The Dragossi greet her the same way others have, puffing out their nostrils. A horned Dragossi twice the size of Dean raises its head to blink lazily at Claws, who lands right on top of the man’s head.

Dean’s extending his arm in horror, a silent shout about to turn loud, but the man just very slowly lowers his hands enough to pet the top of her head. Claws sends a friendly peep down the line, making Dean even more of a nervous wreck.

The man turns around, and gives him a sort-of angry stare. “Are you going to try to steal her again? If you’re such a Red Ruby expert, you know she shouldn’t be away from her nest for long. She’s just a hatchling,” he says. He’s got a boyish charm to him, small buggy eyes, a very positive face, but his posture is defensive.

Dean thinks it must be a joke. A Red Ruby expert who?

The guy rolls his eyes, and claps his hands. The Dragossi relax even further, it seems. “I would have chosen a name less recognizable in the Dragossi trade. Evia Hvai? Really?”

Dean furrows his brows. “It’s the only name I could remember at the time. Who the hell are you?”

The guy points a finger at him. “No, who the hell are you? Castiel’s weirdly adamant about you being his apprentice. I’ll admit to finding him insufferable at times, but today takes the cake. I’ve been taking care of the Dragossi all morning, he’s been gone for hours, and here you are, carrying the Red Ruby out of here again.”

Dean holds up both of his arms, like the time with Castiel near the lake. “She’s royal,” he said, carefully. “No walls can hold her.”

“You’re full of shit.”

A sound comes from the waterfall, the booming, loud announcement of a Dragossi coming home. The same Dragossi that handed him the egg comes flying in, a temporary wall appearing in the
middle of the waterfall. Both Dean and the stranger are startled by the strong wind the Tree Green Dragossi creates with her massive wings.

In the saddle sits Castiel, stealing the breath from Dean’s lungs. His back is straight, the very image of royalty, and Dean has the sudden urge to greet him as one should a King. But he doesn’t, because the second they land, Dean sees a bundle of blankets, holding onto the harness for dear life.

Dean moves before he thinks about it.

The Tree Green Dragossi recognizes him instantly, lowering her head so that Dean can reach his shivering brother faster. Sam takes a peek from his wool blankets, and when he sees Dean, his whole face lights up.

“Dean!” he yells, throwing the blankets off him.

Dean helps him off the Dragossi, wrapping Sam inside of his arms. The relief he feels after seeing his brother knocks all the worry out of his head, and leaves only the warmth he shares with Claws. She knows better than to intrude a reunion. She does send out a happy feeling, matching Dean’s, which he really appreciates.

His brother is safe and sound, no bruises, no lingering damage, no Zhwai marks on him. Dean is so happy he could cry.

Sam hugs him harder than ever. “I thought I’d never see you. Crowley was about to sell me out to Zhwai, but the Guard came and bought both of us -”

Dean brushes Sam’s hair away, barely listening to a word he’s saying. “Are you alright? Did they touch you? I swear to the Gods, if they touched you, I’m going to skin them alive -”

“Dean,” Sam stops him midway. “I’m fine. Thanks to the Guard.”

Dean suddenly remembers they’re not at the Brothel anymore. They’re in the Dungeons of the Keep, in the presence of an actual Prince, an asshole ritualist, and a dozen clearly stressed Dragossi.

Raising his eyes to see if Castiel’s standing there, he finds him oblivious to them talking, already conversing with the other man. So Dean pats Sam down, checking for other signs of violence. “Did he pay Crowley?”

Sam glances at Castiel. Then at the Dungeon. Then, mouth open in awe, his eyes widen, and he says, “We’re at the Keep.”

“Yes,” Dean says.

“Why are we at the Keep? How did you get a Crow Guard to get me out of the Brothel?” Sam’s concerned.

“I’ll tell you everything after I have a chat with your savior,” Dean says, gesturing at Castiel. “Do you want to eat? I know a guy in the Kitchens.”

Sam’s even more confused. Dean gets Castiel’s attention by waving. The Red Ruby is trying to bite his fingers off, while still sitting on the other man’s head. “Feed my brother, get him into bed. I’ll be ready to talk once he’s safe.”

Castiel remains stoic. “He’s already safe.” Dean glares at him until Castiel complies, turning to the man. “I’ll be down here shortly, Samandriel,” he says, then glances at Dean. “Please ask the Red
Ruby to go back into her nest. I’m going to let you see her once we’re done discussing our arrangements.”

Claws hisses. Dean just opens up his shirt, looking straight at Castiel without any emotion on his face. She hops into the air, and flies over to him, goes straight into his shirt.

Sam’s look of complete disbelief does it for Castiel. He sighs. “Alright,” he says, rubbing the space between his eyebrows. “Let’s go.”

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The thief, Dean, demands that Sam live with him in his room. Castiel agrees, silently nodding, and goes with them to get Sam into bed. Dean mothers him with such concern that Castiel’s slightly jealous, never having experienced a connection like that with any of his brothers and sisters. Sam doesn’t even look like Dean. His hair is longer, nose straighter, and his legs don’t have a bow while walking.

Once Sam’s dressed in new linen and safely in bed, Dean says, “Let me go get some food for you.”

Castiel, who has been with them for all this time, says, “We could ask a maid to get the food for him.”

Dean glares at him. “Something’s weird about the Keep,” he says. “None of the servants know the exits. None of them know anything about you. I don’t trust them enough to take care of Sam.”

Sam, still shivering from his trip, scoffs. “I can take care of myself.”

“Oh yeah,” Dean rolls his eyes. “You’re doing real great. What if you get lost and a Guard finds you?”

Sam points at Castiel with his chin. “He’s a Guard,” he says. “And he found me.”

Dean pauses. There’s an awkward silence between Castiel and Dean, a glance for approval of a revelation. “Uh, well,” Dean says. “He’s not exactly a Guard.”

Castiel bows down his head a little, respectfully. “My name is Castiel. Pleased to have made your acquaintance. Your brother tells me you’ve got a good head on your shoulders.”

Sam nearly fucking falls out of his bed.

Dean pats the bedding, and says, “Me and the Master will go get your grub. Sit tight, and don’t go anywhere. I’ve had enough nerves tampered with while sitting here knowing Crowley was about to sell you.”

Sam gapes. “What - what is happening - with -”

Castiel raises his hand, shutting Sam up efficiently. “Surely your brother will explain everything. You have to rest.”

“But Your Highness -” he stutters.

Castiel gives him half a smile. “Please do be careful about calling me Highness,” he explains. “I am
not the King.”

When they leave Sam in Dean’s room, the green-eyed man stops Castiel in the corridor with a pointed finger. Castiel’s back hits the stone wall behind him. A fire burns in Dean’s eyes. “Do not tell my brother about how I stole the egg,” he whispers angrily. “Or about how we met. Under no fucking circumstances.”

“Doesn’t he deserve to know?” Castiel’s voice is calm. “You did it to save him.”

“He would never forgive me for being a thief,” Dean says, lowering his hand. “He would never forgive me being the bad guy in a hero story. I know I’ve fucked up, but at least give the kid a chance to believe in something good.”

Dean doesn’t talk all the way to the Kitchens, so Castiel has time to observe him. He walks with confidence, nothing like the first time Castiel saw him. The front of Dean’s shirt moves. Castiel thinks about the Red Ruby, and how wonderfully she’s adapting to the environment when Dean’s close-by. She can be away from him for a day and a half, but Dean’s rush this morning has proven that the Red Ruby still needs the safety of her true nest.

In the Kitchens, most of the cooks and maids tense when Castiel enters with Dean. He never comes here, and usually makes food for himself. Some make a move to greet him as a royal, but quickly lower their hands.

Dean smiles, ear to ear. “Benny!”

The Head Chef, dressed in a scarlet parka with Laffalkan imagery, raises his hands to greet the thief. “Evia! Nice to see you back so soon.” They hug, as per Laffalkan traditions. Castiel stands there awkwardly.

Benny notices him, the smile doesn’t go away. “The Prince, as well. It’s an honor to see you down in the Kitchens.”

Dean puts his hands on his hips, and glances at Castiel. “Had to drag him here for late breakfast,” he says, changing the atmosphere instantly. Everyone goes back to work. “I am used to eating with a crowd, not by myself.”

Benny claps his hands happily. A flour cloud bursts in the air. “I’ve got fresh bread and some chow ready,” he says, then looks at Castiel. “Maybe the Prince has a preference? We can throw something together -”

Castiel shakes his head, his hands clasped nervously behind his back. “I’d really like to try the bread. It smells heavenly in here.”

Benny’s eyes flash with pride. “It’s not every day I get to feed the Dragossi Master,” he says, and waves them over to one of the tables used for maids and servants. “Sit down while I get everything ready.”

Dean sits. The Red Ruby doesn’t show herself, and the bundle isn’t as evident with the Kitchen lighting. Castiel follows, carefully sitting in front of Dean.

Dean places his hands on top of the table, looking around the Kitchens with open curiosity.

Castiel breathes in. “Should we talk now, or-”

Shushing him, Dean leans forward. “Like I said, I don’t fully trust the walls of the Keep. We can talk
in the Dungeons.”

Castiel doesn’t walk around the Keep much, except when he needs to see Michael or Anna. He knows all the nooks and crannies from when he was little, but doesn’t feel the need to wander anymore. Dean’s right. The Keep doesn’t feel exactly safe.

“How do you know the Keep so well?”

Dean shrugs. “Before, I only knew the Dungeon. Sort of. I mean, not really knew, just knew how to get there and get out. But this?” He gestures at the kitchens. “I explored a little yesterday.”

Castiel hums.

Benny gets back with two full bowls full of meaty soup, with hot black bread. It looks appetizing, and Castiel finds that for the first time in years, he’s not nervous eating something that he hasn’t made himself. Dean digs in, chatting with Benny excitedly. He never loses his Salitian accent, using perfect pronunciation, drawing out the vowels precisely how a Salitian would speak.

Benny smiles at Castiel, who eats slowly, enjoying the flavors. “I’m sorry,” he says. “The grub we make for servants isn’t really fit for royalty.”

Castiel shakes his head. “It’s delicious. Thank you.”

Dean looks at Castiel, then at Benny. “I’m wondering,” he says, in between bites, and extends a hand toward Castiel, pointing politely. “Castiel Novak’s the Prince, second in line. Why does nobody treat him with the respect he deserves?”

Benny tenses a second. Nervously glancing around for other cooks, he leans in. “We’re not supposed to talk about it.”

“IT’s best to leave it be,” Castiel agrees, holding Dean’s gaze.

Dean takes the cue, and keeps eating.

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Dean compliments Benny’s cooking team, and asks for one more bowl for later eating. Benny insists he come down again, but Dean says, “I’ll be working with the Prince all day. I’m afraid I will have no time for coming over.”

Benny gives him fruit, hot food with an alchemical bowl that keeps it heated, and a pitcher of sweetened mineral water. Castiel stays silent through the whole ordeal.

Once they’re on their way to Dean’s room, Dean feels slightly terrified of what’s about to happen. He’s still indebted to Crowley, and there’s no exits, save for the one he triggered and the other, much harder to cross. The waterfall.

Castiel is still wearing his Guard attire, looking so unlike the royals Dean’s seen in paintings. He remembers Sam showing him a big picture with all the Novak siblings. Michael, the ruling King. Anna, the Born-Goddess. Gabriel, the King-to-be, dead before he could take the crown. Gadreel, the dead the traveler Prince. And the last Prince, the third by age, Castiel Novak. His face covered with a
mask. There’s only one explanation, when it comes to Jarsaki art - the person with the mask had not been present at the time.

Dean asks Castiel to stay in the corridor, while he talks to Sam. He complies grudgingly.

Claws has been asleep for hours.

Dean places the food on Sam’s bed, as he wakes up from a nap.

“Eat up. You can rest after,” he says.

Sam digs in almost instantly. Like Dean, he’s never had a full-meal. Dean’s happy he’s safe.

“How did Castiel get you out of there?” Dean asks, sitting down on the bed.

“He bought us off. Paid more than 800 full-rings! Can you imagine? I couldn’t figure out how a Guard could have such a sum of money, but here he was. I was sitting in the middle of Zhwai, listening to them talk. I was so scared, Dean.”

Dean’s heart clenches for Sam. But then, the sum clicks in his head. “He paid 800 rings? Wait. Did you say for ‘us’? Who else?”

Sam raises an eyebrow. “You, idiot.”

He could live like a Lord for the rest of his life with that kind of money. What the fuck. What the fuck.

“He paid for me too?” he says quietly.

Sam nods, slurping the soup.

Claws wakes up, then, feeling the gratitude and intense fear Dean’s sending down the line. She chirps, and Sam’s eyes go to Dean’s shirt.

“You have a Dragossi in your shirt.”

Dean doesn’t know how to explain it without telling the truth. He puffs his cheeks out, and looks down his shirt. “I found her in the forest, while crossing to Patheo,” he says. Kind of true. “Couldn’t figure out why a hatchling would be in the forest, so I brought her to the Keep. Turns out she was lost, and they were looking for her.”

Sam’s sceptical. Like always. “You found a Keep Dragossi in the forest. How did she get there?”

“How am I supposed to know? I’m not a Master.”

“You know how to act around wild Dragossi, though,” Sam says, taking a bite of bread. “Are the Keep hatchlings any different?”

Dean gulps down some air. “Yeah,” he says. “Castiel asked if I knew how to handle a Dragossi when I brought her back, because she seems like she can’t be away from me for too long, and I told him I’ve had some encounters with wild ones. He offered an apprenticeship.”

Sam’s mouth hangs open.

“Dean-”
“I know,” Dean cuts him off. “I still haven’t talked to him about the logistics. I asked him to free you.”

Sam’s eyes furrow. “So you’re indebted. Again.”

“Not really. I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it.”

“Dean, it’s 800 rings. For both of us. With Crowley, it was 4 rings. If this is a debt, we’re never going to be free.”

Dean’s heart drops. “Whatever happens, I’ll get you out of here. That’s a promise.”

Sam crosses his arms on his chest. “And like I said, I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“It’s not your call, Sam.”

“It’s not yours, either!” Sam says angrily. “Are you fucking him?”

Dean’s surprise comes out of nowhere. “What?”

“He’s a Prince,” Sam says, nervously looking at the door. “You’re good-looking and smart. I’d understand if he’s paying you, he doesn’t look like he gets out much. You don’t have to lie to me.”

“I’m not fucking anyone. Although I’m flattered you think I’m such an expensive lay.”

“You can’t blame me for jumping to conclusions. Nothing adds up,” Sam says.

“I’m going to learn the fucking trade,” Dean says, frustrated. “Not that I want to, but I’ve told him my price. He paid it, and I’m about to talk to him about the gods-damned deal. I’ll tell you once I know everything. Alright?”

Sam looks like he doesn’t believe him. It’s so hard to have a smart brother. “Alright. Go.”

“Don’t go anywhere.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me.”

“Just go,” Sam urges him.

So Dean leaves. And meets Castiel outside the door. He’s standing with the same armor, with the same posture, still royal and his eyes are as blue as the lake Dean nearly drowned in. Dean looks down at his feet, and says, “I’m ready to talk if you are.”

“Follow me,” is Castiel’s reply.

***

They go to the Dungeons, through one of the doors Dean had noticed earlier. Claws decides to come out the second they cross the red curtain, perching herself atop Dean’s head.

Castiel gives that small smile, when he sees Dean’s annoyed expression.
“Don’t you dare laugh,” Dean warns.

“I would never.”

In two days, Dean’s understanding of Claws has gotten better to the point of him knowing she’s only accessing the situation from a higher point. She smells danger around the Keep, which she continually reminds Dean of through their bond. Dean doesn’t like thinking about it, but that’s what it is. It isn’t a simple line Dragossi use to communicate, as he first decided. More like a gradually growing understanding of each other without words. The protective, almost familial feeling keeps growing inside of Dean, and he makes a spot for Claws inside of his head right next to Sam. Involuntarily.

Castiel stops before one of the doors. “The Red Ruby-”

“Claws,” Dean corrects him.

Castiel sighs. “Claws has to stay here. We’re going to the storage, with a lot of food that’s not good for her. We may leave her in my library, where she will be safe, if you’re worried.”

Dean looks up at Claws, who has her tiny head cocked to the right, as if she’s listening. There’s no adamant requirement from her to stay with him. She lowers her head, and bumps her jaw to Dean’s hair, acknowledging that she’s going to be okay, as long as he doesn’t go too far. Dean meets Castiel’s eyes. “She says it’s alright. Where’s the library?”

Castiel opens the door, and there’s another, smaller corridor with a set of three doors. Castiel opens the farthest one, and gestures inside. Then, he looks pleadingly at Claws. “Would you be so kind as not to rip my books apart? I’ve had them hand-made for me.”

Claws puffs some smoke out through her nostrils, and flies in. Castiel looks at the books longingly, then closes the door. Dean stares at the door, and says, “She’s not going to do anything to your books. Not in a playful mood.”

“I’ve found that Dragossi games do not depend on their mood,” Castiel says, visibly tense. “I’ve worked hard for my library, and I’d rather not have it in shambles because of a hatchling.”

Dean pauses. “She’s laying on the cushion. If I feel her growing restless, I’ll tell you.”

Castiel doesn’t look like he believes him, because the tension remains. They walk toward the other two doors, and Castiel opens up the first one. There’s a huge area, filled to the brim with precious stones, gems of any variation and color, all neatly packed in stacks or piles with wooden signs, explaining all the allergies and deadly gems for different Dragossi. Dean has never seen this many gems in one place. You would be the richest man alive if you sold the gems. Dean can’t believe all of this is used for the royal Dragossi as food.

Castiel gestures at all of it nonchalantly. “An area of gems creates a safe space for talking,” he says, then sits down on the ground, facing the sparkling beauty. “I’ve purified everything here, just in case my brother wanted to listen in on my conversations with Samandriel. The Dungeons are purified as well, but when I talk about Michael, I choose the safest space possible.”

Dean stands for a while, taking everything in, breathing heavily. Then finally he joins Castiel on the ground. Castiel’s still not wearing any shoes. “So like do gems protect us from black magic?”

“Not really,” Castiel explains. “Their vibe blocks out any magic used for listening in. Think of it as waves in the water, being disrupted by a falling rock. He can hear that we’re talking, but only distorted words.”
“Okay,” Dean says and clasps his hands together. “So. You want to talk to me without him knowing what about.”

“Yes,” Castiel says. He looks slightly nervous. “As I have said, entirely by accident, you have become a problem for me and the Dragossi living inside of the Dungeon.”

Dean opens up his mouth to protest the word problem, but Castiel stops him with a raised hand.

“Let me explain. This situation benefits you, so I suggest you listen. In an unlikely set of events, the Red Ruby decided you were worthy of a bond few would be allowed to make with a royal, very rare Dragossi. Unlike other, lesser Dragossi, who can bond through a very specific established friendship and a set of boundaries, a Red Ruby chooses for itself. The host will almost never have a choice, because, as the books have written about the Three Riders, the blood that flows in a Red Ruby is tied to their original ancestors. Claws has a stronger influence, and she chose you. Why, I don’t know.”

Dean’s eyes widen gradually.

Castiel continues, “Michael doesn’t know much about Red Rubies. He only knows they’re the perfect fighters, lethal in every way, action, thought, and fly faster than anything else. Our Red Ruby is too small just yet, but once she hits her teenage years, she can be the sole warrior in front of a ten thousand Dragossi horde, and she will win. Always. Which is exactly why no countries ever challenge Salitia. With four adult Red Rubies, and new eggs, Salitia is virtually unstoppable. Michael wants that, and he’s got his Red Ruby.”

Dean nods along, feeling Claws start to fall asleep through their bond. Castiel’s silent.

“Does this mean my bond is the problem?”

“Most likely,” Castiel says, scratching his arm. “He may never find out, as long as we keep you as an apprentice. Then, a Master. The Red Ruby will listen only to you, but once Michael trusts you with being a soldier in his army, when he finally decides it’s time to challenge Nethereal for their Gods, you would be by his side, riding a different Dragossi and telling uh, Claws, what to do.”

Dean’s fingers curl into fists at the mention of war. “I’m against war.”

Castiel raises his eyes filled with pity. “If you want to survive with your brother, if you want to live without torture, without Michael sending his Guards and magic to follow you to every part of this world once he’s going to win the war with Nethereal - you can go. Take the Red Ruby, take as many gems as you want from here, and run.”

“How are you this sure he’s going to win? Nethereal has the Emperor, and his army of Age Guardians. Not to mention the Pharia Gods behind his back.”

Castiel looks down at his feet, breathing in sharply. “I’m under oath not to tell. But I can tell you this - he’s going to win, and he’s going to reign.”

It’s the first time Dean believes him. The terror going through his veins is too real for him to handle, and he feels Claws reach for him. He doesn’t want war. But he wants Sam safe.

“What do I have to do?”
Castiel takes Dean out into the city. He’s dressed in a dark winter toga, made from charcoal washed wool. They got Dean a similar parka to cover the linen clothes he borrowed from Castiel.

They talked for an hour, deciding the best course of action, to keep all of them safe. Dean is to meet Michael today, dressed in Jarsakian clothing, in order to show respect to the country. Castiel doesn’t mention how much he’s paid for Sam and him in the Brothel. When Castiel says Dean needs new clothing, Dean just lowers his head, murmuring that he has no money to spare for clothing good enough for the Keep.

Castiel grabs a few of the gems on his right, and jams it into Dean’s open hand.

They’re walking through one of the richer areas in Patheo, the place where royalty get their goods from only the highest sellers. People here don’t care about high prices of bringing goods through the forest, or even around Patheo, through a safe route. Claws is safely closed in the nest, after much coaxing from Dean. Dean’s eyes jump back and forth between every single shop they pass, the way he walks is stiff, uncomfortable. Castiel places a hand on his shoulder, getting his attention.

Dean’s eyes are wild. Vividly green, even with all the dark surrounding him.

“I’d like us to remain secretive. Let’s just say I’m a Jarsakian Lord from the West, and you’re my cousin.”

“We don’t look alike,” Dean says, blinking.

Castiel shakes his head, huffing a laugh. “The clerks won’t care, as long as we have the rings.”

“I only have gems.”

“They’ll accept gems, and give you the change in rings. It’s alright. You don’t have to speak at all, if you don’t want to.”

Dean stops walking. Castiel waits for him to calm down. Castiel’s noticed that whenever the Red Ruby is around, Dean’s as calm as a sheep, but she’s not here now. Dean’s fidgeting, eyes jumping from Castiel to the ground. He puffs his cheeks out, clenching the edge of his parka. “Okay, so,” he mumbles, quietly enough so that Castiel can hear. “Fuck. Okay.”

“Take your time,” Castiel says, and beckons him to sit down in one of the chairs of a small bakery, with an alchemical cylinder warming them up. A bakery girl comes over, and Castiel asks for two heated raspberry ales. Dean sits, brushing his hands on his linen pants. “I know you don’t trust me enough, but I need to know what’s bothering you so I can help,” Castiel says.

Dean avoids Castiel’s eyes. He talks when two black-glass cups sit in front of them, and he takes a drink. “Sam told me you paid 800 full rings for - You know.”
Castiel takes a sip of his own drink. “Yes.”

Dean meets his eyes, brow furrowed worriedly. “I’ll never be able to pay for either of our freedom.”

Castiel doesn’t understand at first. The confusion sets in for no more than three seconds, until everything clicks in place. Dean’s freak outs, his mistrust, refusal to trust Castiel’s word, and Sam’s safety.

Pushing the ale away, he places both his hands on top of the table, then grabs Dean’s chin, makes Dean look at him. Then, he says, “I gave you my word,” he says, thinking about the hair he cut off, the simple, yet truthful promise. “The deal does not mean you’re indebted to me. Nor does it mean that your brother belongs to me. You both belong to yourselves now. I only paid the price to have you listen to what I wanted to ask of you. And you did. What you decide from now on is on you.”

He releases Dean’s chin, and Dean ignores his drink completely, still looking Castiel right in the eye. “What you’re saying is - you’re telling me that I am not a slave?”

“I am not my brother, Dean,” Castiel says, sincerely. “I dislike the very idea of owning a person. Trusting you and the Red Ruby might be the biggest mistake of my life, but the only way to ensure the safety of people I care about is to hope you stay and help me.”

They finish the ale, and Dean doesn’t mumble a word while Castiel picks appropriate clothes for an audience with the King. In the end, Dean’s dressed in a high collar black wool coat with silver pins, along with leather breeches that protect him against the freezing wind. The shoes are Dean’s favorite - light for walking, but sturdy, strengthened with iron. The shop owner gives them a bag of other clothes; a parka with Jarsakian embroidery, a toga for unofficial business, the shirts, breeches, pants. Everything Dean touches with the utmost care, fingers trembling while handling the bag.

Castiel shows him one of the various entrances to the Keep he uses to remain unseen by the public eye. As they’re going through the heel of the Giant, Dean stops Castiel by grabbing his hand. “I’ll help you,” he says, head lowered. “And once I’m able, I’ll pay you back for our freedom.”

***

Upon finding out that Dean had been living with Sam in a tiny room, Castiel decides to choose unused apprentice quarters to arrange a second room in the Dungeons specifically for Sam.

Dean sits on Sam’s bed, fresh with new bedding, while Castiel remains standing. Sam’s in awe of having so much room to move.

“We’re going to stay here a while,” Dean mentions, sharing a glance with Castiel. “Since we can’t tell anyone you’re my brother, we’ve got to explain your presence somehow.”

Sam sits down next to Dean, and looks at Castiel. “I can do everything. Cleaning, cooking, accounting. Whatever you need me for, I’ll do it.”

Castiel clicks his tongue, crossing his arms on his chest. “I was thinking of asking you to work at the archives. The Keep’s clerk has been bound there for centuries, I think the loneliness is getting to her.”

“Bound?” Dean asks in disbelief.
Castiel nods. “Charlotte. Her father asked one of the Keep’s Gods to bind her in order to battle an old sickness. She’s a wonderful person, but weird right here.” Castiel emphasizes the word by tapping his head.

There are loads of people who decide to be bound to a place, or a thing, or even a person. While Bound, you never rot, but your body might as well be a walking corpse. Dean’s seen two people like this up close, one of them deep in the forest, next to the Moonlight waterfalls filled with poison, and the other an old woman in the Brothel, who loved that place more than she did life. Dean feels pity for the girl, knowing she’s been in the Archives for so long without freedom. Sam looks excited.

“Well I be able to borrow books?”

“If Charlotte lets you,” Castiel says. “I’m afraid I do not have much influence there, either.”

They agree on going to the Archives together the next day, after Dean’s first apprenticeship lesson. Castiel leaves some books for Sam to read, asking him to stay inside of the room, lest Gordon comes looking.

Castiel leaves Dean to dress up after they’ve talked again in Storage.

Dean dresses meticulously, changing into what Castiel thinks a great fit to greet the King. He chants Castiel’s words in his head. Do not meet his eyes. Do not speak if he doesn’t ask. Do not defend me if he demean my existence.

As Dean walks inside of the Dungeon, throwing the red curtain apart, Castiel raises his blue eyes to see him. The Prince is dressed in very simple, undeniably royal clothing. The collar matches Dean’s, but the embroidery is different. The gold glitters with every move Castiel makes.

Dean opens his arms up, pulling a grin. “Eh? How do I look?”

Castiel pauses, looking unfazed. “Like you’re dressed.”

“C’mon, man,” Dean says, looking down at himself and gesturing at all the fancy lapels. “At least give me one compliment. I’ve never had anything this expensive on me, ever.”

Castiel walks around the clustered table, buttoning up his cuffs. Dean follows the gesture with his eyes, thinking that Castiel’s fingers look too polished to belong to a Master who deals with Dragossi on a daily basis. “You look the same as you looked in breeches.”

Dean rolls his eyes, and they exit the Dungeons together, shoulder to shoulder. “That wasn’t a compliment.”

“I am not a man capable of complementing something so trivial.”

“I’m starting to understand why you never go to any parties. You’re shit at communicating.”

Castiel doesn’t answer, and Dean doesn’t press.

Maybe he shouldn’t be talking to a Prince like this. Maybe it’s disrespectful, but it’s hard not to feel familiar with Castiel when all he’s done in the past few days is treat Dean like a friend instead of a thief.

Castiel leads him to an alchemically enhanced elevator, which quickly takes them to one of the top levels of the Giant. Dean isn’t fond of heights, but Castiel, almost sensing Dean’s tension, places a comforting hand on his shoulder, gripping lightly. It’s the second time it’s happened today. Dean
doesn’t shake it off.

“It’s going to be alright,” Castiel says, with that calm voice of his. “It will take ten minutes, no less.”

“I’m more scared of how calm you are.”

The edge of Castiel’s lip tips up. “I’m not. Let’s go.”

Dean doesn’t dwell much on the encrusted doors, or how blinding the inside interior is. He walks in, eyes cast downward. He sees a long table, clashing with the decorations around it, and two chairs at the end of it. With his peripheral vision, he sees King Michael, sitting on the throne, and Gordon, who he’s met before. The third chair is unoccupied.

The Crow Guards announce both of them, as Dragossi Master and Evia Hvai, the apprentice.

Castiel drags his thumb down his nose, as per greeting, and Dean hurries to follow. Michael doesn’t seem to notice that Dean’s nervous.

“Evia Hvai!” The King’s voice booms. For one second, Dean’s eyes meet Michael’s vicious ones, and he looks away just as quickly. There’s a pause. “Welcome to Jarsaki.”

Dean bows down, on his right knee, then lowers himself enough to touch the ground with his elbow, and extended palm. He’s done this twice before, while attending to some Salitian customers back in the Brothel. “Your Highness,” he says, dragging out the vowels. The exaggeration seems real enough for Michael to hold his hand up.

“Stand, apprentice,” Michael says. “Is Master Joel well?”

Dean stands, glancing at Castiel for a second. Castiel doesn’t even look at him, or at the table. He has his eyes cast downward, silent as death. Dean says, with confidence, “Yes! The Master sends his regards. He hopes you are well.”

Michael nods along, pursing his lips. He’s sprawled on the throne, the very image of cruel and unbothered. Dean’s eyes hurt from all the glittering surfaces. How the hell does Gordon sit there, eyes kept wide open? Michael then gestures for them to sit.

Castiel moves automatically, without urging. Dean follows by his side, sitting in the uncomfortably big chair, careful to not move the wrong way, or meet Michael’s eyes again.


Dean wipes his clammy palms on the fabric of his pants. Feigning cocky confidence, he gets comfortable in his seat. “The Master has taught me the way of Salitian Dragossi, and for that, I am thankful. But to be a Master who can breed, train and think like a Dragossi, I need to continually seek knowledge. Master Joel had recommended Prince Castiel after their encounter with our precious Red Ruby.”

Michael doesn’t let his attention wander from Dean. It’s unnerving. “Have you met my Darkness?”

Dean opens his mouth, already aware of the name Michael has given to Claws. Like Dean, Castiel has stated he doesn’t approve of her name. He’d rather call her Claws, anyway. “Yes, your Highness. She is a healthy hatchling. Very playful.”

“Ah,” Michael says, slowly exhaling. His manner of talking is somewhat dangerous, filled with
anger. “You have met my own Dragossi quicker than I have. I am sure you know that on the day of your arrival, Darkness had been stolen.”

“I am aware,” Dean gulps.

Michael looks over at Gordon, who clears his throat. “It’s awfully convenient of you to come when our Red Ruby goes missing.”

Castiel’s shoulders tense. Dean locks eyes with Gordon, face of absolute nonchalance. “I have all of my transportation documents with me, with copies signed by the Salitian Galghey Caravan. Are you, by chance, accusing me of causing the thievery?”

Gordon fidgets in his seat. “No, apprentice. Just observing.”

Michael seems satisfied with the answer, but Castiel’s tension doesn’t go away.

“Since you have seen her,” Michael speaks again, “Is there any lasting damage? Any, well, deformities?”

“No, your Highness,” Dean says. Michael’s assessment of Claws is getting under his skin. As if she’d be any less if she had deformed limbs. “She is a healthy hatchling. Just like her parents, she has started out well. Master Castiel and I will observe her until her teenage years. You will find reports of her growth every week, just as you’ve asked.”

Michael slams his chalice on the table, making everyone in the room flinch. Even the Crow Guards. Slowly, he says, “I’ve changed my mind, Evia Hvai.”

Silence. The sweat on Castiel’s forehead runs down his face. Dean avoids looking anywhere but at the diamond pins on Michael’s chest.

“You shall give me the reports,” Michael continues. “Every Friday. You will recount your week, and join me for dinner.”

Dean gapes, closing his mouth, and opening it, unable to figure out what to say next. They haven’t talked about this with Castiel. Shit.

“I’d - I’d be honored, your Highness,” Dean says, bowing his head slightly, panic setting in. His stomach churns. “Castiel and I will -”

“Castiel will stay where he is, and know his place,” Michael says it like a warning. Like Castiel’s dirt beneath his feet. “The Red Ruby is my biggest concern. As a Red Ruby expert, you can tell me more than he can. Which is what I expect of a Dragossi Master.”

Dean curses in every language he knows inside of his head. Claws hisses through the bond. “Yes, your Highness. Fridays.”

Silence follows, until Michael raises his hand and dismisses them without another word. Castiel stands up, leaving Dean to gather himself up, and follow behind him quickly. They do not speak the whole way down to the Dungeons. Dean observes Castiel’s tense shoulders, the way he walks with a purpose of getting away into safety, how his fists clench and unclench. It’s like watching him think out loud.

Castiel visibly relaxes when they’re surrounded by the artistic mess of the Dungeon entrance, the smell of books and dust hitting Dean’s nostrils. Samandriel’s there, sitting in front of the table.
“How did it go?” he asks.

Castiel doesn’t answer. Doesn’t so much as look at Dean. Just disappears through the door, slamming it behind him. They listen to him slam the second door. Samandriel flips the quill in between his fingers, lips pursed.

Dean makes a move to follow the Master, but Samandriel says, “Don’t. He gets like this every time after Michael.”

Dean takes a breath in, but doesn’t say what’s swirling in his head. Then, he says, “We’re all doomed, aren’t we?”

Samandriel drops the quill on top of scribbled parchment. “Who cares anymore. I’m no longer afraid of death,” he says, grudgingly. He catches Dean staring at the closed door. “Oh quit being a fucking puppy. You’re going to see him every day for twelve straight hours from now on.”

“What?”

“Your apprenticeship, idiot,” Samandriel says, rolling his eyes. Even his snarky comment doesn’t change his kind face. “It starts tomorrow, when light hits the Giant. I’d suggest running away from Jarsaki, but who the hell listens to me anyway?”

Dean doesn’t. He’s more worried about Castiel, alone in the library. But Dean feels longing from the nest where he left Claws, and all rational thought goes out the window. “Claws is hungry,” he says suddenly. “Where can I get her food?”

***

Castiel always wakes up easily. Eyes open, he’s ready to start a day full of taking care of Dragossi.

Today, however, he hasn’t had a wink of sleep, and sits at the foot of his bed, hands clasped together on his thighs, back hunched.

His quarters are a mess. There’s clothing scattered all over the floor, some of it with broken off precious gems, some cut up into pieces. Castiel pushes off a black expensive parka with blue lining using his foot. It had been a gift from a previous lover trying to apologize.

Castiel doesn’t think about the mess he made in the library yesterday. The loose paper on the ground makes for a great carpet anyway.

Going down to the Dungeons, Castiel makes himself some food in the private kitchen he had built a few years ago. It’s not light outside yet, but he might as well get ready for teaching.

Samandriel finds him sitting in front of the lake, with three Dragossi hatchlings jumping up and down as he throws small sized gems in the air. Castiel’s got his eyes fixed on the waterfall, deep in thought.

“You really do need to take some draught for your sleeping problem,” Samandriel says, plopping down next to Castiel. The Dragossi scatter from them.
Castiel shrugs. “What problem?”

“I’m very good at understanding when you’re awake.”

Castiel’s quiet, rubbing circles on a topaz gem. “I’ve asked you to stay away from my head.”

“It’s hard when you’re swearing so loudly,” Samandriel says apologetically. When Castiel doesn’t answer, Samandriel continues, “If you want to talk about it, we could always go into storage.”


Samandriel furrows his brows. He looks like he’s on the edge of saying something profound, calming, but Castiel beats him to it, “Please check on the Red Ruby. We’re going to have to somehow train her to be more independent.”

“From who?”

“She’s taken a special interest in Dean,” Castiel says, pulling at his ear. Samandriel gets it instantly. Castiel will have to tell him about his plan sooner rather than later. He’s going to need all the help he can get.

Samandriel leaves the second Dean shows up near the waterfall following Samandriel with his green eyes. He’s dressed in dark linen, perfect for working with Dragossi. Castiel notes he’s going to need more food and more exercise in order to work full-time. Dean’s awake, face fresh, no bags under his eyes. He points his thumb over his back, saying, “Couldn’t get into Claws’ nest. She’s pissed.”

Castiel stands up and wipes off the black sand. The tiny Dragossi run around him, squeaking and flapping their tiny wings. Maybe he should integrate the Red Ruby into this group of friends, assimilate her with other Dragossi, so she wouldn’t need Dean all the time. “Samandriel’s going to take care of her,” he says, “I need to explain what we’re going to do from today.”

Dean clears his throat. “She’s really pissed. You sure Samandriel’s gonna be okay?”

Castiel thinks about the small, baby-faced man in front of a small Red Ruby. He says, “He’s friends with all Dragossi, I’m sure the Red Ruby…”

“-Claws.”

Castiel sighs. “Claws will like him enough to not bite his nose off.”

Dean takes some of the topaz gems into his hand and gives them to the hatchlings, who sniff him cautiously before taking their food from his hand. Dean looks at them in thought, then says, “We don’t like the name Darkness.”

“She’s Michael’s Dragossi,” Castiel reminds him.

Dean wipes the sand from his hands, doesn’t meet Castiel’s eyes. “Oh so she belongs to him because he paid money for her?” He raises his eyebrows. “What about me and Sam then?”

Castiel starts moving toward the nests. “Michael considers everyone his property,” he explains. “I don’t own you, because I am not him.”

Following Castiel, Dean huffs out a sarcastic laugh. “So am I his property?”

“We’re going to have to talk about this,” Castiel says. “Since he’s taken an interest in you, I am not sure how to proceed. He meant it when he said he wants you to report to him every Friday.”
“What’s up with that. Why is he so against having you in his presence?”

Castiel shows him inside of one of the bigger nests, lined up with eggs of every kind, a group of half-sized teenaged Dragossi watching their every move. “Michael has his reasons. I’d rather not talk about it now.”

“All right,” Dean says, stepping over an egg. “Whatever. My next question is, what’s on the agenda? What do I gotta do to become a Master?”

Castiel lifts one of the eggs up, checks it with his fingertips, blows on it to make it glow, revealing a small Dragossi inside. Dean is so fascinated that he barely catches what Castiel is saying.

“Every Master begins with cleaning out nests. But with you, we’ll need to get you in shape, because you’re not fit enough for labor like this. I’m going to teach you how to wield a sword, how to ride a Dragossi, and how to act like you’re Salitian royalty.”

“Okaaaay,” Dean draws out. “When are we gonna train with Claws?”

Castiel stares him down. “Samandriel’s taking care of her training.”

“I’m bonded with her.”

“And if Michael finds out she listens to you, and only you, we’re all dead.”

***

Dean’s silent for a while, so Castiel waves at him to come over, which he does. Dean doesn’t like the sound of having to clean out Dragossi dung, but he’s been cleaning rooms after client sessions at the Brothel, so he guesses it won’t be as bad. What he really wants to do is grab a sword and kick ass.

“When can I get a sword?”

“When your arms are stronger.”

“When will my arms be stronger?”

“I don’t know,” Castiel answers. “Depends on our regime.”

Dean touches the side of the next nest they approach. An older, much more pissed off Dragossi grunts at Dean, smoke coming out of their nostrils. The Dragossi has overgrown claws, sharper than anything Dean’s ever seen. Castiel hands him a shovel, and points at the cart, face stoic. It smells like rotten eggs and vomit inside.

“We’re going to work alongside each other. I take all of the nests on the right, you take the ones on the left.”

“Do we have any masks?”

“No.”

“It smells like death.”
“It’s part of your training,” Castiel explains, his eyes glittering with amusement. Dean thinks he’s being kind of cruel. “We’re going to do this twice a week. I want you to write down every single nest smell, with as much detail as you can.”

Dean’s back tenses. He can’t write this down. He can’t, but it’s too embarrassing to say it out loud. “Okay.”

“I’ll expect reports from you on Sundays. Write them on your downtime.”

Dean picks the shovel up, heart hammering. “I get downtime?”

Castiel stares at him, leaning against the wall, with his eyebrows raised in genuine surprise. “Didn’t you have hours and days to yourself?”

“I’m a slave, Cas,” Dean says. It’s the first time he uses a shortened version of Castiel’s name, and hopes Cas won’t comment on it. “I’ve worked every day of my life.”

“Well, you’re not a slave anymore,” Castiel says. “You get Fridays off. We’re going to work every other day, depending on the Dragossi cycles. I’ll give you a rough estimate of all the days I’m going to need you to work, and others you can spend however you’d like. Your salary—”

“Whoah, wait,” Dean stops him. “We didn’t talk about any salaries.”

Castiel clears his throat. “As a foreign apprentice, we are required to pay you for the job.”

“You paid enough already.”

“I’m not the one paying you,” Castiel’s voice is lowered. “Michael is.”

Dean doesn’t like thinking about Michael. He still remembers the cold look on Michael’s face, and how bad he doesn’t want to go see him on Friday. Thankfully, now that he knows he has Fridays off, he can prepare himself mentally. Dean’s highly unlikely to get used to having free days, but welcomes it as a gift.

“I don’t like this.”

“You’re going to have to get used to it,” Castiel says, and takes his own shovel. “We’re stuck together, whether we like it or not. Which means you’re getting paid.”

Dean gets left alone with the angry Dragossi. Castiel disappears in a bigger nest up front, on the right, as he mentioned. Sighing, Dean walks inside, unable to avoid the mess on the ground. Thankfully, the Dragossi just huffs at him a few times, sniffing him. The connection with Claws lights up, playful, and then annoyed. Dean sends her what he smells, and she answers with an image of Samandriel trying to catch her in the fake-nest. She feels unfamiliar with it, still. She especially doesn’t like that Dean is so far away when they could be exploring together. Claws has so many emotions, it makes Dean’s work easier to forget. Cleaning out the nest turns out to be even harder than he originally thought, because the Dragossi refuses to budge when Dean needs to clean out what’s underneath. The smell is getting everywhere, but Dean doesn’t complain even to Claws. They share a few images, warmth surrounding their conversation. Dean thinks about her, wants to see her after he’s done, but once he’s dirty and out of breath, he meets Castiel outside of the nest, who somehow looks absolutely clean, and he shows him where to throw out the garbage and empty out the cart. Then, the whole process repeats itself. Dean enters a bigger nest with three Dragossi, gets pissed off but is too afraid of shouting at the teenaged Dragossi, who think of him as a playmate.

By the time they’re done with half the nests, Castiel brings him bread and cheese, with light, savory
mead to drink. Dean gobbles everything down in record time, opens his mouth to ask about Claws, but gets redirected into a nest with, again, an older Dragossi.

Dean’s muscles scream at him when they’re both done but Castiel doesn’t look fazed at all, he just hands Dean a pitcher of water, and says, “Get up early tomorrow. We’re going to train.”

Even though he hurts all over, Dean goes to see Claws. Samandriel meets him halfway through the corridor, and raises his hand. “Not allowed.”

“What? I want to see her.”

“I want a lot of things that I can’t have,” Samandriel says. He moves forward, making Dean go back. Dean’s about to hit Samandriel in the face. “Tough shit. Red Ruby noses are very sensitive.”

“Claws already knows what I smell like.”

Samandriel stops in his tracks. “How?”

Fuck. Oops. He shouldn’t have said that. “Can’t you smell me from like a mile away?”

Samandriel snorts. “I’d smell you all the way from Nethereal. I’d suggest going to the Dungeon baths.”

“There’s baths down here?” Dean asks, genuinely surprised.

“Castiel’s already there,” Samandriel says, and drags him through another tunnel, next to the nests. “He didn’t invite you?”

“No,” Dean says, flustered. “We’re not that friendly.”

“He won’t care,” Samandriel says. “There’s enough room for at least thirty people.”

“You won’t join us?”

“I don’t do well with hot water.”

“Oh,” Dean says, and gestures at Samandriel, non-committally. “Because of your uh… magic powers or whatever.”

Samandriel glares at him. “Magic?”

“Yeah. The prayer or something you did next to the waterfall.”

“It’s not magic. It’s alchemy.”

“Okay.”

“Go bathe. I can’t stand being next to you.”

Dean looks like he’s been in mud all day. He smells, and he’s fucking tired. You know what, screw this. So what if he bathes with the Dragossi Master? Not like he hasn’t seen anyone naked before -

Suddenly, Dean can’t breathe. He can’t go in there. Not with the markings on his body.

Samandriel pushes him forward, despite all of his protests and reasons why he doesn’t like bathing. They enter a bigger area, with niches hammered into the stone, lined with fluffy towels, and woven
baskets for clothing. Dean sees a basket full of Castiel’s dark linens, all carefully folded. Dean nearly goes into a panic mode.

Samandriel points at one of the baskets. “Put your dirty clothes there. The Maids will come here and clean them.”

Dean can barely hear what’s going on. There’s images in his head, all flying in a hurry to be forgotten sometime soon. Even Claws can’t help him calm down, with her warmth and comfort growing with each second.

The second Dean wants to scream and run, Castiel comes through the wooden doors, with a towel on his hips, and thick fog coming from behind him. Dean gets hit with heat and a mist of water, and Castiel’s amazing blue eyes on him. There’s no mistaking Castiel’s beauty. His chest is wonderfully built, muscles tense as he notices Dean watching.

So Dean breathes out an apology, as he hears Samandriel say, “Can’t believe you didn’t ask him to come with you. Do you have a nose?”

Castiel walks over to his basket, and throws his linen shirt on, face red from the heat of the sauna and water inside. “I forgot.”

“I don’t have to bathe,” Dean says, feigning confidence. “I could swim around near the waterfall.”

“Oh no,” Castiel says, dressing quickly and efficiently. Dean catches a glimpse of white calves and nearly fucking chokes. “You’re free to go inside. I’m done already. You deserve to relax after today.”

Dean gapes like a fish.

Castiel looks at him, eye to eye. The breath Dean takes gets stuck in his lungs. Castiel’s dark curls are even darker from the water, his skin looks like it’s glowing. “You’ll sleep better. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

They both leave, and Dean’s breathing heavily. The markings on his skin feel like a curse, because if he could have gone inside with Castiel, the way he looked right now, Dean would’ve died there and then. With a very good imagination, Dean drops his destroyed clothing into the basket, avoids looking into the mirrors on the other side of the room, and goes inside to the baths.

The wonderful black and blue walls of the baths catch his eye the second he walks in. It’s unbearably hot, but as Dean walks through the several different ponds, all with different colors and smells, he finds the one he’d been using with Sam back in the Brothels. The famous cold bath of Jarsaki isn’t liked by anyone else except for Jarsaki themselves. Dean liked the icy cold of the bath from when he was little, and once his overheated foot touches the water, he sighs. Sinking in up until his nose, he feels his body accommodate to the cold environment. It smells minty, and the water is salty, a luxury Dean’s never tried before. Submerging himself in the water, Dean allows himself to forget all of his problems.

Flashes of the forest, and a lady with white hair, run through his head rapidly, but they’re gone once he breaches the surface, taking deep breaths.

Dean gets out the bath faster than he wanted to go inside. The water looks calm, crystal clear. Dean can swear he sees two stone eyes looking at him.

He tells himself this isn’t real. So he bathes. Doesn’t think about the forest, or the Lady. Instead, he thinks about blue eyes and the baths.
Dean gets up earlier than usual, hoping he can get Sam up before his training begins today. All of his muscles scream at him in agony as he dresses, the black tunic Castiel lent to him hanging off his lithe body like a potato sack. Dean navigates the Keep without encountering any of the Maids, which is still creeping him out, but the need to talk to Sam is greater than any thought about what’s going on in the halls of the Keep.

Sam’s asleep in his bed when Dean barges in. The starlight candle is still lit, a few books are on the table, but nothing else has changed since the last time Dean had seen him. He jumps on the bed, hears an oof from underneath the warm black silk covers. Sam’s crazy bed hair appears seconds later.

“Dean?” A sleepy voice calls out.

It’s not the first time Dean’s done this to Sam. It’s highly likely no other person has ever pounced onto Sam’s bed, so Dean isn’t at all surprised that Sam knows who came over this early in the morning. By the looks of it, Sam went to sleep not long ago, either.

“I need to talk to you,” Dean says. He grabs the covers, shoves them off a groaning Sam, and grabs one of the books. “Teach me how to write and read.”

It takes a second for Sam to understand what’s going on. His sleep-driven eyes meet Dean’s excited ones, and he’s more confused, than awake. “You need what?”

“I need to learn how to read,” Dean says, in a rush. “I don’t have time for this. Wake up.”

Sam rubs his eyes, and sits up straighter, sighing. “Alright. Why?”

“Castiel’s asking me to write reports on everything I’m doing.”

“I can write the reports,” Sam says.

“No,” Dean answers, showing the book. “I can’t just come and ask you every time I need something written or read. When are you starting your work at the Archives?”

“Samandriel, I think that was his name?” Sam wonders, “he came over yesterday, showed me around the Dungeons. Didn’t really want to show me around the Keep, though. I get it, I’m supposed to be a secret for now, but I would’ve liked knowing how to get to the Archives. He said I’ll be starting after your meeting with the King.”
“Fuck,” Dean says, eyes wide. “I thought you’d have more time than this.”

“We’re going to work around our schedules, then,” Sam says, keeping calm. “Come to my room after you’re done with Castiel, every night. I’ll ask for parchment and quills, some alchemical lighting, and some chalk from Samandriel.”

“How are you going to explain why you need them?”

“Why would I explain myself?” Sam says, yawning. “I’m gonna be the Archive boy, yeah? I’ll need to practice my writing anyway.”

Dean hugs his brother, ruffling Sam’s hair even more, despite his protests. “Okay. Okay. Wow. Tonight, then.”

“Think of what you want to write.”

“Dragossi.”

“Just that?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I mean we’ll have to write something more elaborate to learn more letters, and some Jarsaki colloqualisms, but-”

“Sam,” Dean interrupts him, smiling. “I’ll take everything you’ve got to show me. My biggest regret is that I haven’t asked you to teach me this before.”

“You had a lot on your plate,” Sam adds.

“Got even more now. Okay, buddy, go back to sleep. I have to go train.”

“What time is it?”

“Too early for you,” Dean says, covering Sam up with the covers, tucking him in. Just like old times. When they were little, and Dean would go work, but he’d leave Sam in his small bed, warmly tucked underneath woolen covers, with two of the other Brothel Boys. Sam settles into the bed, watching Dean go.

“Hey Dean?”

Dean stops in the middle of opening the door.

“Don’t overwork yourself,” Sam says. He’s already dozing off, but his words sound clear. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Goodnight,” Dean bids, and walks out, a happy strut in his walk.

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Castiel is already waiting for him, dressed lightly, shoeless, and with a frown on his face. “You’re late.”

Dean scratches his neck, eyes cast downwards, with a visible frown on his face. “Couldn’t really
sleep last night.”

He notices Castiel’s hands are covered in dark blue bandages, tightly woven around his fingers and knuckles. Dean’s seen this before, during celebration brawls, or even fights that were meant to be entertainment for the guests at the Brothel. He’s only seen women fight in the ring of fire, but it’s nice seeing Castiel with the same technique of wrapping on his hands. It dawns on Dean, then.

“Have you ever fought in the ring?” Castiel asks. Figures.

Dean looks down at Castiel’s feet, where a basket full of wrappings and other basic fighting materials lay. Dean’s not scared of this, absolutely not. He’s been interested in the art of fighting all his life. Didn’t have much time to learn, though, what with the constant pestering from Crowley, with work that needed to be done from the early hours of the morning, till night. With one meal a day.

“I’ve seen a few fights,” Dean says. “I couldn’t join in. They said I was too tall for any of them.”

Castiel huffs out his disapproval. “Crowley should have seen the potential in you.”

“I’m not much of a fighter, Cas,” Dean says. “Wouldn’t bet on me winning.”

“We will see,” Castiel says, after a pause.

He gets the first wrapping from the basket, the one with the widest stretchy fabric. Steps closer, and asks for Dean’s hands. For one reason or another, Dean’s eyes go straight to Castiel’s fingers, carefully gripping his thumb, then checking his knuckles, and basic bone structure. Castiel’s vaguely describing what he’s doing, but Dean’s ears don’t seem to catch on. He keeps his gaze on Castiel’s long fingers, the pads and sides all worn out, some of them look like they used to have blisters.

Castiel starts wrapping Dean’s fingers. The fabric sticks to Dean’s skin easily, so with intricate twists, stretches, some coaxing and the first hand is almost done. The second one, Castiel guides Dean to do it himself. Dean tries to listen, but at the same time, he can’t stop thinking about Castiel’s warm tone. The explanation is pointless if Dean’s not really listening.

All the while, he can feel Claws’ restlessness, she’s getting curious about Samandriel now. Dean knows Samandriel’s there with her, because when she sends a very specific smell of rain and thunder down the line, it’s Samandriel he remembers.

Castiel snaps his fingers in front of Dean’s face. “Are you listening?”

Dean blinks rapidly, and looks down at his already wrapped hands. “Yeah. Absolutely.”

Castiel narrows his eyes, but doesn’t comment on it. He shows his own knuckles, flexes the fingers, then curls them into a fist, with his thumb over his fingers, not inside. “Be sure you never have your thumb in the middle. You might dislocate the bones while hitting someone.”

Dean practices, and it feels weird holding your thumb out like this, but who is he to judge Castiel’s tutoring?

So Castiel teaches him, effectively, how to slam face-first into the ground on his first try at fighting.

“Get up,” he says, while Dean spits dirt out of his mouth. Some Dragossi are watching, smoke coming through their noses. “We don’t have all day.”

Dean strikes, but Castiel easily evades, twisting on his heel when Dean plants his body on the
ground, hard.

This goes on for a few minutes, with Castiel dodging every single one of Dean’s attacks, and completely demolishes Dean’s plans of bringing the Master to the ground. When Dean lunges again, Castiel’s fist meets Dean’s nose, and for the second time this week, Dean passes out.

When he wakes up, Castiel’s crouched over him, his blue eyes almost giddy. “Good morning,” he says.

“You can shove your good morning up your ass,” Dean groans.

Castiel helps him up, gripping his forearm. Dean’s not surprised Castiel’s grip is strong. Castiel moves with the grace of a fighter, a lean, beautifully sculpted fighter. And yet his face remains kind and thoughtful. Dean shoves those thoughts away, and concentrates on not falling down. His head is dizzy, there’s a trickle of blood going down his nose. Castiel doesn’t seem to care.

“You’re being predictable,” Castiel comments.

Dean circles him, fists in front of him in a fighting stance. “I’ve only ever had bar fights.”

“Did you win?”

“Not your fucking business.”

Dean goes for it, but Castiel ducks, extends his leg and without using much force, brings Dean down into the dirt, again.

This goes on for quite a while. Dean gets knocked out, Castiel gets him up, then makes him eat dirt over and over and over. Dean is getting pissed, somewhat aroused, and it’s tiring him out. His arms hurt. Legs scream out in agony. Dean’s used to physical labor, but not exercise that takes everything from him. Castiel looks like he hasn’t even broken a sweat.

“You’re not learning anything.”

Dean glares at him. “You’re not teaching.”

Castiel gives him a half-smile that is calculated. “You learn through practice. I would like it if you directed your attention to what I’m doing, not what you’re about to do.”

“Can’t I multitask?”

“No. We’re going to practice until you knock me out.”

Dean blinks. He feels Claws encouraging him through the bond. She’s seeing whatever he’s seeing, and it’s overwhelming when she sends slow images of Castiel’s repetitive motions. Dean feels like this is cheating, but he does want to show off to Castiel at least once.

“Alright, bigshot,” Dean says, making a come at me gesture. “Let’s go.”

It takes Castiel three seconds to lock Dean in his arms. Dean can’t move. Castiel’s body is pressed against Dean, and it doesn’t help that Dean’s ridiculously into seeing Castiel fight. Dean’s plan to cheat isn’t exactly working when he’s thinking about Castiel’s strong arms. Claws sends an amused note through the line.

“She’s helping you, isn’t she?”
Dean huffs out a restrained laugh. “Who? What? No!”

“You should really work on concealing your expression whenever you’re communicating with her. It is very rude to cheat when your teacher is in front of you.”

“It’s not cheating,” Dean says, helplessly trying to wiggle out of Castiel’s grip. “She’s just… replaying what I’ve been observing.”

Castiel lets him go. Dean stands there, breathing heavily, hands on his hips. “I’ve never heard of a bond getting so strong this quickly.”

Dean raises his eyes to meet Castiel’s. “She’s been doing this for a while.”

“Can you send any of your own thoughts to her?”

“Mainly images,” Dean says. “She understands what we’re talking about, but she’s not very good at voicing out what she thinks. So it’s easier to send her what I see, instead of what I think.”

Castiel remains deep in thought when they go for another round of punches. Dean isn’t getting any better yet, and it’s getting harder to get up after Castiel’s calculated round-kicks. Dean takes the time to appreciate how good Castiel is at this.

Dean’s hands hurt from chafing, his knuckles are bright red underneath the stretchy fabric. He isn’t ready to give up yet. He starts noticing the little things first. Castiel uses his body weight efficiently, but whenever he throws a punch, his leg automatically moves backwards, for a stronger result. Dean works with that, stops thinking about what he’s about to do, working on autopilot.

Castiel’s forehead is shining with a thin sheen of sweat, while Dean’s completely drenched. He knows it’s not a good look on him, but couldn’t care less, especially when a quick plan forms in his head.

He had learned this trick a few years ago, during one of those bar fights when he let himself sneak out of the Brothel for some drinks with his close friend, Pleasure. Both of them would get so drunk, Dean would struggle to get up in the morning. Pleasure, however, seemed to have kidneys made of steel, because he’d get up and work the same day with no headache to speak of. A few of those times, Pleasure got himself into situations that would require him to fight his way out of the bar, which is why Dean would always get the short stick. Pleasure’s pretty good at avoiding fights, but Dean can’t resist a good punch while drunk. And he knows from experience, that the solar plexus just underneath his chest area is a guarantee win situation. So Dean crouches. Stops overthinking. And attacks.

Castiel is ready for whatever Dean has in mind, but since Dean is usually predictable in the way that he starts his fights, Castiel doesn’t see Dean’s plan. Which is how Dean manages to maneuver himself underneath Castiel’s arms, head bent low, and he rams into Castiel’s plexus with full force.

Castiel chokes on his breath, eyes wide with surprise. Dean shouts as he pushes Castiel back, hands placed on Castiel’s sides, he has full control of the situation. Dean pushes so hard, he can’t see what’s in front of them, and Castiel loses his balance as they hit the edge of the water. They go down together, a loud splash causing the other Dragossi around the lake to raise their heads and see what’s going on.

The water is cold, but not cold enough for Dean to come up for air shivering. He’s laying in the water, breathing heavily, as his hands search for something to grip on. Castiel follows suite, looking like a wet chicken. Dean sees him, disgruntled, and after a torturous pause, he starts laughing.
Castiel’s dark look is slightly scary, but Dean doesn’t think it’s malicious. It looks weirdly alluring. The thought scares the shit out of Dean more than Castiel’s rebound punch, because when Castiel gets up to get his revenge, Dean pulls the quickest stunt of all time - he splashes Castiel right in his face, and tackles him into the water, screaming out a battle cry.

It’s the first time Dean sees Castiel relaxed, face tinted red with exhilaration. His hair looks darker in the water, and Dean’s distracted enough for Castiel to drag him back in. They’re acting like children, but Dean couldn’t care less.

It’s when they stop that Castiel’s look changes from playful, to business in a second. Samandriel’s standing on the sand, wearing his stupid water boots, mouth agape.

Castiel stands up in the water, dripping waterfalls. He clears his throat, while Dean lets out a snort, and laughs, falling back down into the water. It’s relaxing enough that Dean thinks about how he would like to swim around the lake.

“You’re contaminating the water!” Samandriel says.

Castiel gets out, shaking himself off. “Calm down, Samandriel. We’re getting out.” He looks at Dean pointedly.

“Point taken,” Dean says, and crawls out of the water. The dark sand clings to the wet linen. Somehow, Dean’s body doesn’t hurt as much. Only his nose, which has stopped bleeding, feels strangely stuffy.

There’s an awkward silence between them, but Samandriel’s angry stare gets Castiel going. “Alright. We’re done with today’s sparring. Let your nose heal, and we’ll meet here tomorrow. Have you started your report?”

Dean catches himself staring at the way Castiel’s wet clothing makes his biceps stand out even more, and just says, “Yeah. Yes.”

“You’re dismissed,” Castiel says, leaving with Samandriel.

Dean stands still for a second. Claws purrs through the line, so he goes to see her before going down to the baths to warm himself up. He thinks more about the fight than he does Castiel, which is a good thing. Maybe. Surely.

***

“How’s training?” Sam asks, holding a cloth full of iced meat on Dean’s swollen nose.

“So good,” Dean manages. It’s hard to breathe through his mouth, and talk at the same time. They’re in Sam’s room. Dean’s exhausted beyond belief, but the need to learn how to write is far greater. So he sucks it up, and lets Sam take care of him. “I’m really, really nailing the part where I fall on the ground a million fucking times.”

Sam laughs. “You’re learning from the Dragossi Whisperer. What did you expect?”
Dean takes the cloth out of Sam’s hands, and holds it in place himself. “Not like I have a choice in expecting *anything*. This guy is crazy.”

“Crazy good at fighting?”

“Smart, too. Possibly smarter than you.”

Sam raises an eyebrow.

“Maybe,” Dean winces. He sounds unsure of himself. “Okay, whatever. Teach me how to read.”

Sam has an arsenal of books laid out on his bed, with a couple of granite pencils, and quills with ink. He’s about ready to burst from excitement, and tells Dean all about his day while getting ready to make Dean learn.

“I’ll be meeting Charlotte soon,” he says, handing Dean a pencil. “She’s the Archivist, one of the best in Jarsaki. I’ve read a few legends about her in the Book of the Damned Souls—“

“You’re going to start working, when, exactly?”

Sam furrows his brows in deep thought. “It depends on Charlotte herself. Samandriel said she’s very honored to get a helper. The Archives haven’t been cleaned and sorted in years.”

“How come?”

“Well,” Sam goes into one of his explanatory moods, where his eyes sparkle, and he’s sitting straighter. “Charlotte’s bound to the Archives, which makes her body stay in between life and death. She can move certain objects, but she gets tired easily, and her body changes color according to her emotions. She doesn’t have blood inside of her, but the black substance comes out of her veins when she’s in deep distress, and it’s stressful to clean out an entire library full of ancient scrolls.”

“Black substance? You mean like blood?”

“I wouldn’t call it blood. Since she’s dead, she doesn’t have any. It looks like dirt, but no one is quite sure what it is. Samandriel thinks it’s just what ghosts pump with their hearts.”

“Ew.”

“Hey. Don’t be rude.”

Dean shrugs. “So you’ll help her out.”

“Seems like it, yeah,” Sam beams.

“I’m proud of you, little brother. Go knock them dead.”

“She’s kind of dead.”

“Not my point,” Dean says.

With that, Sam ends their conversation and starts teaching. From the smallest letters, to consonants and vowels, to weird dots Dean’s seen in writing, but never knew what they meant. It’s confusing, but Sam’s a good teacher, and Dean’s a quick learner.

By the time they’re done with their first session, Dean’s dying for sleep, and the minute he falls into bed, he sleeps like a newborn baby.
Dean gets some time off on his third day, after Castiel makes him carry a ton of water to the hatchling nest. While Castiel runs some errands in Patheo’s streets, Dean lets himself wander off to the Kitchens, where Benny greets him with arms open wide.

“Evia,” he says, smiling from ear to ear. “How nice of you to come here, and grace me with your wonderful complementing skills.”

Dean laughs, thinking about Castiel and how bad he is at giving compliments. He hugs Benny, like Lafallkans do, and plops down on the bench near the Kitchen tables. “I’m always hungry for some perfect Jarsakian food.”

Benny says, cautiously, “Do you, by chance, like any Lafalkkan food? I’ve been specifically asked to make our famous curd and sugar cakes, and some curd pancakes.”

“Knew you guys only eat curd.”

Benny seems to light up, “Is why I am a sturdy man. My wife thinks Lafalkkans are crazy.”

“I like curd,” Dean says. He’s never tried any, though. “Bring it on, old man.”

“Who are you calling old?” Benny calls out, while walking to one of the bigger brick ovens. “I am still young, by anyone’s standards.”

“By Lafalkkan standards,” Dean corrects him. They’re about the same age, but their banter is light-hearted. “Fuck, Benny, that smells amazing.”

Benny brings a plate full of the curd cake he’s been talking about. And the pancakes, on the other. The first bite Dean takes is heavenly. He moans around the spoon, eyes closed against the sensation. Benny’s beyond happy when Dean praises his food.

While Dean eats, Benny tells him all about the gossip around the Kitchens, and the maids. Even if no one knows how to get out of the Keep, they sure do know what’s going on inside of it.

“You have been the talk of the year, my friend,” Benny says, crunching on an apple. The Kitchen is busy, but Benny leaves the work to other chefs. “Castiel hasn’t left the Dungeons in years. I’m very honored you brought him here to eat.”

“Doesn’t he eat what you guys make?”

Benny shakes his head. “Oh no,” he says. “Rumor has it, he hasn’t eaten anything from the Kitchen since his lover Balthazar disappeared.”

Dean’s eyebrows shoot up. “His lover?”

“What, you think he’s frigid? Castiel’s had a few men in his life, all of them much more colorful than the last. None of them lasted long. I’ve heard he’s not making any moves toward a romantic relationship now. People think he’s cursed.”

Dean winces.
Benny just nods, agreeing to the sentiment. “I don’t think he’s cursed, or anything like that. I believe it’s his brother’s fault.”

Dean mouths King Michael.

“Aye,” Benny answers. “Poor Master. He’s bound to be married to his work until the day he dies. I’m very happy you’re there with him.”

“There’s Samandriel, too,” Dean says.

“Samandriel doesn’t bring a lot of happiness to our dear Castiel Novak. You, however, made him come here. I’d say it’s a step in the right direction.”

“A step to where?”

“Friendship,” Benny points out, and finishes his apple.

Dean thinks about this word for a long time, even after he gets back to the Dungeons, to say goodnight to Claws. Castiel’s still gone, but it doesn’t mean the thoughts about him don’t linger. Maybe, just maybe, a friendship wouldn’t hurt. Would it?

***

Castiel climbs up the Keep, through the oldest stone stairs inside of the Giant. There’s windows and platforms for resting every few hundred steps, which Castiel takes advantage of. Patheo looks different when riding a Dragossi, but it also has some charm while Castiel observes it through a small opening. He can’t imagine how Jarsakians carved the Keep’s Giant this way, how they knew where to cut, or how heartbreaking it had to be to understand their loyal friends were never coming back. Castiel touches the cold stone when he’s resting on one of the platforms, the only light comes from the small window. He breathes in the sultry air, and climbs forward.

Anna’s quarters are the coldest in the Keep. None of the maids or servants come here, so Castiel makes sure he brings a bag of alchemical fire-wood with him every time he visits her. It lasts her a few weeks, and even though she doesn’t physically need the warmth, she appreciates the gesture.

Castiel’s out of breath when he reaches Anna’s door, which is made of glass. He can see her sitting on her bed, reading a book placed on her knees. Castiel’s thankful to Charlotte, who smuggles some of the books inside of Castiel’s bag without letting Michael know.

He sets the bag down, crouches on one knee, and places his right hand on the ground between the bag and himself. The way you’d greet a high-ranking Goddess.

Anna raises her head instantly, feeling the gratitude and prayer Castiel sends her way, and a beautiful smile blooms.

She beckons him to come inside, which he does. It’s so good to see her inside of her safe zone. Michael never visits her here. He sends notes through her window.

There’s a little bit of snow inside, Anna’s bare feet leave footprints as she opens up the glass door with her magic. The cold seeps into Castiel’s bones, but he doesn’t show discomfort. Not to Anna. Her tunic barely covers anything.
“Cassie,” she says, and hugs him close. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Castiel smiles, as she pulls away. “Charlotte asked me to bring you a few of the books from the Dragossi chronicles. Are you going to try to usurp me and my Dungeon?”

“Yes,” she says, digging through the bag. She gets the alchemical fire-wood out, and splays it over the coal in the hearth. With a clap of hands, and a breath of magic, the fire starts easily, lighting up her face. Her red hair looks the same as the fire. “I wouldn’t have to climb the stairs whenever Michael needs my presence in the Main Hall.”

Castiel winces. “I’m so sorry I didn’t come earlier.”

She sighs. “I understand. You were preoccupied with your new apprentice.”

Castiel doesn’t like lying to Anna. It’s very hard to keep something from a sister, especially one who is a true Healing Goddess. People pray to her. Every day and night. And Michael has her locked away in the Keep, as if a trophy.

“Samandriel could have taught him instead of me,” Castiel says. “I’m being selfish.”

She rolls her eyes, and grabs a few of her black silk pillows, throws them on the ground, and makes him sit. They huddle together in front of the fire, as Anna looks through the books. “According to Michael, Joel Nathigard sent us an expert.”

“He did,” Castiel says, sweating.

Her lips are a thin line of worry. “He’s been talking about him non-stop. Apparently Evia is really beautiful.”

He is, even if Castiel’s not one to care about looks. Dean is absolutely gorgeous. A memory surfaces, one of Dean in the water after their lesson, happily laughing, cheeks red. The freckles on his face are just as big of a distraction as Dean’s way of speech. He shakes the thoughts away. “Is that all he said?”

Anna shakes her head. “He asked Gordon to go through some of the Salitian cultural scrolls we have in the Archives. Specifically,” she says and breathes in nervously. “Courting.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Michael’s taken an interest,” Anna says apologetically. “This is bad.”

It really is. Fuck.

“He has an audience with Michael on Friday,” Castiel says. “I’m not sure if we can do anything about Michael’s wishes.”

“Do you remember Princess Kalina?”

“I did not partake in any of the parties Michael had for her, but I have met her, yes.”

“Her mother is Salitian. Which is why she didn’t want anything to do with Michael. I’ve talked with her a few times when Michael wasn’t there to watch over us, and she was very disturbed by Michael’s boldness. I think he’s going to try this time.”

“Salitians have very strict courting rules, hopefully Evia isn’t going to be insulted,” Castiel thinks. He’s nervous as hell, then. Does Dean know about the rules? Is this going to be a problem?
What scares Castiel the most is Michael’s interest. This is going to be harder than Castiel originally thought.


“Me too,” Castiel says.

They sit in silence for a while, and Anna says, “Tell me about the Dragossi.”

Castiel smiles warmly, and tells her about the Dungeons.

***

Dean’s awkwardly standing in front of the mirror in his room, looking at the glittering cuffs and buttons on the dark fabric, with the collar up to his chin. It’s unbearable, but Castiel insisted he should wear it, solely for Michael’s entertainment. Castiel also asked him if he understood Salitian courting rules, he doesn’t. Castiel gives him a book full of references, and Sam reads it to him in one night. Dean feels uncomfortable with the idea of the King finding him beautiful. Michael doesn’t have a good reputation among his people, and it makes Dean nervous. Dean dislikes everything about these clothes as well, but what can you do when you’re going to meet the King? Alone, in the dining room of the Keep? If someone told Dean he’d be lying right into the face of a King today, he would have laughed. He’s not laughing now.

Castiel’s nowhere to be seen when Dean gets to the Dungeon. Claws gets excited the second she senses him closer, sending ecstatic bursts through their bond. Dean calms her down, sending an image of Castiel, but she dismisses the thought with images of her own ruby stack, and Samandriel reading to her. Dean walks around the Dungeons, goes through the Dragossi nests, but doesn’t find Castiel anywhere. Frustrated that he’s left alone with his rising nerves, he comes over to Claws. It’s the only place he feels like he’s at home, even if Samandriel’s there, his hawk-like stare piercing through Dean’s skin. She meets him next to the entrance of her nest, her whole body wiggling when Dean lets her climb onto his shoulders. Instantly, Dean’s at peace.

Dean’s been training for almost a week now, and his body hurts everywhere. He’s cleaned out the nests twice now, and punched Castiel exactly once. Learning from Sam is as hard as he’s imagined, and basically, his week already sucks. The only thought keeping him sane is the fact that Claws is here.

Samandriel barely raises his eyes to meet Dean. “He’s not here,” he says.

“Then where is he?” Dean says, scratching beneath Claws’ jaw. She’s almost purring from the contact.

“Out,” Samandriel says, sets down the book. Grabs a ruby, and throws it to Dean, who catches it swiftly. “He’s nervous about you meeting Michael.”

“Like I’m not?” Dean snorts. Claws crawls over his arm, weighing it down, but once she grabs the ruby, she flaps her wings and lands on top of the hay nest, filled with bites of rubies, and other gems.
“I wanted to ask him for advice.”

“I’m his right hand,” Samandriel says. “Ask away.”

“I want to speak to Castiel about his brother.”

Samandriel’s eyes flash with something dangerous, but the smile remains. Dean can’t figure out the angelic features of his body. The way he holds himself is strange in itself. Dean’s never seen him go out anywhere, or even try to get out of the Dungeon. He’s never seen him eat anything Castiel’s made, or go to the baths. Samandriel puffs his chest. “I know Michael better than anyone.”

“You’re an apprentice,” Dean says, gesturing at him. “I ain’t seen you anywhere near where Michael sits on his ass all day. Castiel sees him every other week.”

“I’ve had my fair share of time with Michael,” Samandriel says. Claws crunches up the ruby, clearly disinterested in the conversation. “You’d be surprised. Castiel’s the only reason why I’m still here and not up the hills getting away from here.”

“You have a choice,” Dean says.

Samandriel’s silent for a single moment, as if he’s contemplating. “My choice would end in a complete disaster. The only choice I have is the one Castiel makes for me. The second I feel threat to myself and the Dragossi around me, I’m fleeing with all of them. I’m sure he’s told you about our negotiation.”

“No,” Dean says, sitting down on the nest, with Claws curling up to him, buzzing with warmth and happiness. “He hasn’t.”

Samandriel gets comfortable in the seat he’s dragged inside of Claws’ nest, one leg over the other. He stares at Dean with such fervor, it’s hard to tell if he’s angry, or interested just to tell Dean something about himself. “Castiel cares about the Dragossi so much, that in the event of an unsolvable problem, he’s going to do anything to keep them alive. So, since he would die for them, I’m the one in charge of getting them out of the Keep when he goes on an eventual suicide mission.”

“Wouldn’t you help him survive though?” Dean asks.

Samandriel snorts. “Not on my agenda. We have an arrangement, not a friendship.”

But when he says it, Dean can see a tint of red in his cheeks, a rush of something he senses is a well-thought out lie. Dean doesn’t want to get on Samandriel’s bad side, so he decides not to comment. “Okay then, Mister Know It All. Tell me about Michael. Specifically, what to do to earn his respect.”

As Claws curls on Dean’s lap, Samandriel says, “Don’t look into his eyes.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, dude.”

“Michael likes compliments. Mostly about his wealth. Please don’t talk to him about politics, he only ever listens to Gordon, who is a giant fucking asshole and knows next to nothing about politics. Tell him how beautiful he is, how much you love his fucking gems, and how embarrassed you are because you’re flirting with him this early.”

“I don’t want to flirt with the King.”

Samandriel rolls his eyes. “The only way of getting Michael to do what you want him to do is through his pants. He’s a sociopath with terrible anger management issues. The only time I’ve ever
seen him less angry was in bed.”

There’s a pause. Dean says, “You slept with him?”

“Castiel got me out of Michael’s magic spell. It’s why I agreed to keep his Dragossi safe.”

Dean wants to comfort Samandriel, but doesn’t know how. “Wait. Magic spell?”

Samandriel raises an eyebrow. “Michael is using the Gods of Patheo to his own advantage. Haven’t you wondered why none of the Keep’s servants ever leave?”

Dean gapes.

Samandriel digs through the pockets of his breeches, and provides Dean with a small stack of leaves, tightly threaded together to make a bundle. “Swallow one leaf before eating with him. Whatever magic he desires to place upon you will be nullified. Under no circumstances must you act differently around him. He will think you’re immune, and that’s what we need him to think. Michael’s smart, but he’s really bad at reading people. Don’t be overly suspicious, and you should be fine.”

Dean takes the leaves with a shaking hand. Claws feels his distress, and raises her head to boop Dean’s chin with her nose. Dean appreciates the gesture, but his nerves don’t go away. He wishes Castiel was here. Samandriel’s cold and stormy attitude doesn’t help Dean’s head from filling with every possible bad outcome. “Thank you,” he says. “For this. And taking care of Claws.”

“Claws, huh?” Samandriel says, and fucking smiles. It’s the first time Dean has seen him smile, which is both scary and kind of adorable. Samandriel pats his knee, looking at Claws. She asks for permission from Dean with pleading eyes. Dean snorts, and gestures at Samandriel. She squeaks, flying over to Samandriel’s lap while Samandriel continues, “She really likes you. I trust her instincts more than I do humans. You must be a good person.”

“I don’t know, Samandriel,” Dean says, standing up. “I can’t speak for myself, but if you’re starting to trust me, guess I should put more trust in you.”

Samandriel says nothing for a second, petting Claws. Sighing, he mumbles, “Be safe. Don’t do anything Castiel wouldn’t do.”

“I don’t know what Castiel would do, since he ain’t here.”

“Be an apprentice,” Samandriel says before Dean leaves. “Not yourself.”

Dean laughs, suddenly confident. He walks, barely remembering where to go. But while he looks for someone to lead him to Michael’s quarters, he thinks that this apprentice life isn’t so bad.

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Castiel is really a put together person when he has nothing to worry about. For a long while, he’s only had to worry about Dragossi, Samandriel, and Anna. But now that he’s standing in a Butcher’s shop, staring at all the different meats on display, all he can think is that if Dean blows this, they’re going to end up just as butchered as the red, bloody meat in front of him.

He takes a couple of beautiful steaks, some marinated meat for later meals, and pays with a tremble.
The owner asks if he’s alright, to which he stutters and gets out of the shop as quickly as he can.

It’s no different outside. He’s struggling to breathe, and the weight of the bags he’s holding don’t do much to ground him. Dean’s in there with Michael, a power hungry sociopath the whole country is afraid of. All alone. With no one to help.

Except for Claws.

Castiel walks into a couple different shops. Buys more food. Then spices. And finally settles for the last shop of the day. A beautiful pastry shop owned by an old lady, who always lights up when he comes over. She knows him as Jimmy, which is what she exclaims when he comes inside.

But before he can answer her, he notices a very familiar face in the corner of the shop, sitting and drinking a cup of mint tea, glittering cheekbones catching Castiel’s eye. “Jimmy,” the old lady says, and beckons him over. “How nice to see you. It’s been a long time since your last visit.”

Castiel can’t take his eyes away from Pleasure, who is dressed in Jarsaki black. But the black is sheer. Shimmering. Stunningly mouth-watering. He gapes, and in spite of himself, says, “Could I have a cup of tea? I’d like to rest my feet before I go back home.”

She isn’t fazed by his awkwardness at all. “Sure, honey,” she babbles on. “I’ll bring you a few fresh buns, too.”

Castiel nods, way ahead of himself. Something about Pleasure feels off, but Castiel can’t put a finger on it for the life of him. When Castiel steers straight for his table, Pleasure raises his cup, and gives Castiel a wink.

Castiel doesn’t understand his own feelings towards this man. It’s certainly not lust, or romantic interest. It feels more like a surge of power, a sight for sore eyes on a rainy day. Pleasure is very relaxing to look at.

“How have you been,” Pleasure says, and after a pause, “Jimmy?”

Castiel sits down in front of Pleasure, and thanks the old lady for his tea, served with a plate of steaming hot buns he really likes. His stomach turns. “You’re not working.”

Pleasure smiles cunningly behind his cup. His dewy skin shines when he sets the steaming cup down. “I am enjoying a day off.”

Castiel takes a sip of his own tea. It’s rich in taste, a hint of sugar filling his senses. It’s weirdly calming. “What brings you to Patheo?”

“Oh yes, how suspicious of me. You’re a Guard, aren’t you? Should I explain my decision to come to Patheo’s famous pastry shop in full detail? I might bore you, dear, but even boredom has a price tag.”

“I’m not paying you for talking to me.”

Pleasure cocks an eyebrow up. He stays silent, drinking some more mint tea. The quiet is filled with tension, and Castiel doesn’t understand where it’s coming from. He has never had a lot of problems speaking with men he doesn’t really know. Especially a high class escort. So he thinks, fuck it. Boredom it is.

Once Pleasure receives a small pouch with a ring in it, he drums his fingers on the table, and purses his lips. “I am here to see a long time...friend.”
“By friend, do you mean client?”

Pleasure rolls his eyes. “I did tell you I am enjoying a day off. I like having moments to myself where I am not living for earning money or fame.”

Castiel takes a bite of the pastry. It’s buttery inside, with a hint of some foreign spices. “You just got a full ring for talking to me.”


“You offered boredom. I paid for boredom.”

Pleasure moves like a cat, graceful, yet fast. The way a fighter would move if the fighter also dabbled in latest fashion. “Are you bored, Castiel?” he whispers.

Immediately, Castiel’s attention is fully directed at Pleasure. Time slows to a full stop. Pleasure just smiles into his cup.

“Crowley told you.”

“Oh no,” Pleasure says. “He tells me shit.”

“Then how?” Castiel demands. Thankfully, the old lady is far enough away not to overhear.

Pleasure leans on the table, and draws circles with his pointer finger on the black marble table. “You’ve got not one, but two of my boys. I’m inclined to know where they are, and who took them away from me.”

Castiel lowers his voice. “They’re none of your business anymore.”

This gets a snicker from Pleasure. “You just happened to stumble upon my treasure, and you have the audacity to call them yours? Did you feed them when they were little?”

“No, but that isn’t the point-”

“Did you dress them? Did you bring little Sammy books and read to him before sleep? What about taking Dean out for an ale, then?”

“I haven’t. You know perfectly well that I haven’t. How old are you?”

“Who said I did any of those things either? I’m making small talk about their childhood.”

Castiel nearly hits the table with his fist. “Please stop fucking around. How in the Seven Giants do you know them? How did you know my name?”

“Please,” Pleasure rolls his eyes. “Not all I’ve said was a lie. I did take Dean for a few ales. The kid really deserved some free time from Crowley.”

Castiel slams another bag of rings on the table next to Pleasure’s empty cup. “Answer my godsdamned questions, Pleasure.”

Pleasure’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh,” he says. “You’ve figured out my payment system. I’d applaud if I could, but I won’t. That’s not nearly enough rings for a standing ovation.”

Castiel’s glare seems to do the trick.
“Samandriel,” he says. “He’s my all time favorite customer.”

“He visits the brothel?” All of Castiel’s nerves go out the window. He’s more curious than surprised.

Pleasure clicks his tongue, and makes a disgusted sound. “Oh no, I don’t work at the brothel. I’m a traveling businessman, see. I go and see my clients in person.”

“So when we met,” Castiel says. “You were there with a client?”

“Crowley is my client. I go there whenever he needs my aid.”

Nothing adds up. It makes Castiel even more frustrated. “Samandriel told you about me?”

“He vents,” Pleasure says. “You’re not really fun, apparently. All you do is work and worry. But it doesn’t matter. I’m meeting Samandriel in an hour, which means Dean and Sam are going to be alone in the Keep.”

Castiel feels his gut clench painfully. He almost forgot Dean’s meeting Michael.

“I’d really love to chat with you,” Pleasure continues. “You’re an important person to Samandriel, and I would like to know more about you. So, I would love it even more if you could mix a set of Dragossi scales, mint leaves, and Lafallkan sand into a bowl. Light it up on fire, wait for it to turn blue. If it does, we’re going to meet here in an hour after the blue fire. If not, I’m busy. Do consider this friendly, free of charge advice.”

There’s an underlying threat in Pleasure’s voice, one that makes Castiel shudder. “What if I don’t want to talk to you?”

Pleasure shrugs, stands up. Leaves one ring for the old lady. “Wouldn’t you want to know more about my treasure?”

He leaves, and Castiel thinks. Treasure. Does he mean Sam and Dean?

What the hell does that mean?

***

Dean breathes in and breathes out. Crow Guards stand on both sides of the door, carefully avoiding his eyes. Dean can’t even imagine what it must be like to be in constant danger. Even a small mistake might end up in your death. When Dean was working in the Brothel, he would hear all of the cruel things King Michael had done to the people he thought had wronged him in any way, be it a glance, a word, or appearance. Michael isn’t the well-loved King he thinks he is.

Gordon is one of the Guards, staring him down maliciously. Something is really wrong about him. But something is really wrong about this whole situation anyway, so Dean just glares at Gordon until he looks away.

The doors open before Dean can knock or ask the Guards to let him in. A few Maids scurry out, carrying various trinkets, and their heads are bowed down. Michael is already sitting behind the table, dressed in a diamond-encrusted shirt. Dean instantly dislikes the room. The unnecessarily placed gems make Dean’s eyes hurt. Michael’s bed is bigger than Dean’s ever seen, with silk and
cotton sheets. The colors clash with each other, and it seems no thought was put into how the room should look. Dean’s not one for luxury, but this looks like overkill.

As he takes it in, Michael clears his throat. Dean freezes in place, then greets the King with the thumb down his nose and lips. Michael practically eats him alive with his gaze, eyes dark with something Dean can’t put a finger on. He feels that something is deeply wrong about this place, and about Michael himself. Michael waves him over.

“Evia,” he says as Dean takes his seat on a golden chair, with diamonds and rubies placed on the edges. “You needn’t worry, I am sure I will enjoy your company.”

That’s not why Dean’s worried. But he raises his eyes, and meets Michael’s for the first time. It’s surreal looking at him like this. Michael’s eyes look nothing like his brother’s. The color is muddy gray, and Michael’s disgusting interest is clear as day. Dean breathes in sharply.

“I am not worried, Your Majesty,” he says. The accent is easy to do, and takes his mind off the situation at hand. If he fucks up even once, Castiel, Sam, Claws, and him are done for.

Michael isn’t bothered by Dean looking directly at him. Dean clearly remembers Sam reading to him about Salitian courting, which requires direct eye contact at all times. Michael obviously knows this, because Dean is still alive. Dean’s hands shake a little when he grabs a chalice full of sweet red wine. Michael raises his own cup, in silent greeting.

“Well then,” Michael says. “Surely you are very busy with my Darkness. Have you started training her yet?”

No how is she, or is she healthy and alive and happy. He only cares about her being the perfect soldier. Dean’s fingers tighten on his cup. Claws feels his rising anger, and hates Michael with him, her open disgust makes it easier to smile at Michael. “She is still a week old, your Majesty. It will take a few months until we can properly train her.”

Michael scoffs. “Many of my Dragossi have been trained from the first day they were born.”

“She is not a simple Dragossi,” Dean says, barely containing his true feelings. “She is royal, just as you are. Were you forced to train when you were a baby? A Dragossi is an equal. We have to let her be a child for a while.”

Michael really dislikes the idea of someone talking back to him. Dean knows this, but can’t stop himself from defending a Dragossi he has come to trust with his life in a week. Claws feels this, and sends a happy peep down their bond. “I would like to see some progress by the end of the month. Do not let Castiel stall you and your work. I know how much he likes to talk. If he didn’t have Samandriel, I’m sure half of my Dragossi would be brain-damaged from his laziness.”

This is bullshit. This is complete, and utter bullshit. Dean has seen how hard Castiel works to keep all of these Dragossi alive and happy, how much he loves all of them, knows their personality traits. How he always gives them more food, how he talks to the older Dragossi, and how he plays with the hatchlings. Castiel’s hands have scars from all the burns, and bites, and here Michael is, pouring dirt all over Castiel like it’s nothing. Michael reminds Dean of some of the customers back at the Brothel. Unfeeling monsters, treating the Brothel employees like shit. The Netherean men were the worst - he could smell the pride radiating off them, their narrowed eyes always on him as he was dirt beneath their feet. Zhwai were worse, but at least they were polite. Sometimes dark magic was better than sadism at the expense of innocent people. Dean dislikes the fact that Castiel lets Michael talk about him this way. Chills go down Dean’s spine, as Michael sets his cup on the table with a loud, cold thump.
“Castiel is hardworking,” Dean says, almost through his teeth. Thankfully, Michael doesn’t notice Dean’s discomfort.

“Because you are pulling him up from the ground. I am delighted you are here, Evia. In more ways than one.”

Dean’s not hungry anymore when the Maids rush in again, placing a feast of Jarsakian food in front of him. Dean remembers the leaves Samandriel gave him, forgotten in his pocket. He panics, staring at the food in front of him. Benny’s cooking looks mouth-watering, but the fear in Dean’s veins makes him stall, he thinks of ways he could eat a magic-cancelling leaf before Michael can notice. Did Michael enchant the food now? Or did Benny poison it with Michael’s dark magic?

His hand trembles as he reaches into his pocket, feeling the bundle of leaves graze his fingertips. It’s unnerving to see Michael’s eyes on him all the time. Gods, he should’ve taken the damn leaves beforehand.

Nerves rising up, Dean takes a bite of the glorious garlicky steak in front of him. It’s as wonderful as he expected it to be, but his heart hammers against his ribs so hard, Dean’s getting dizzy.

Michael continues, “You are unnecessarily tense, I see -” And then, Michael decides to start courting Dean the Salitian way, which makes Dean’s stomach clench painfully. “-would you mind if I ordered the red mead?”

Red mead. Every Salitian family knows how to make it. Dean remembers Sam talking about it, because Red Mead isn’t just any alcohol you could get on the market. In Salitia, you offer Red mead to a person you would like to marry, or even have intense intimate relations with. Red mead is considered to be a nice way of asking a person if they’d be interested in trying. Dean takes a deep, but shaky breath. Castiel’s face flashes before his eyes, holding up a chalice full of mead, but Dean shakes the thought away. This is not the time to think about the Dragossi Master.

“I-” Dean can barely get a word out. The food is making him nauseous.

“Does my company make you nervous?”

Yes. “No, Your Majesty, I just - “ Dean manages out. He hates that he needs to lead Michael on, but with their plan, it’s impossible to stop himself from saying the words a Salitian would as they’re starting to accept courting. “I would love...to drink some Red mead with you.”

Claws hisses through the bond. Michael, however, looks absolutely the same. If he’s happy with Dean’s answer, he doesn’t show it.

Michael talks about himself, then. About his achievements, the money he has, the Red Ruby, and all of this royal nonsense Dean doesn’t care about. Dean’s feeling equally disturbed, and somewhat interested in what Michael has to say.

In a matter of seconds, Dean’s out of breath, and his appetite is back. He eats. Laughs at Michael’s jokes. Raises his eyes to Michael’s, smiling at him widely, heart thumping in his chest. Something is wrong, but Dean’s head swims with Michael and his stories. The gems shine brighter, and Dean’s attention is fleeting. With every word coming out of Michael’s mouth, Dean laughs lighter, thinks Michael isn’t that bad.

Dean doesn’t talk much himself, listening to Michael intently. It feels as if every thought Michael has is the most important thing in the world right now. Dean loves this. He loves Michael. He wants Michael, he wants -
Screeching fills his head. A stream of images, shouts, and heartbreak fills his head, and gradually, as Dean’s fighting the feeling of love, he remembers Claws. She’s thrashing in her nest, voicing out the danger she feels when Dean thinks about Michael that way.

The nausea Dean feels in his stomach is horrible, but once he sees Michael’s curious eyes on him, the silence of the room filling all of his senses.

“Are you alright, Evia?” Michael asks coldly.

Dean gasps for air, Claws keeps bombarding him with her thoughts. He mumbles, “I think…” Dean closes his eyes, and continues. “I think I am not used to Jarsakian food. I am sorry, Your Highness.”

Michael just waves it off. “Seven Giants,” he says. “You Salitians have stomachs made of feathers.”

Dean doesn’t have to feign the wave of wrong coursing through his body. “Forgive me, in Salitia, our food is less rich. I do not want to ruin our dinner –”

Michael raises his hand, stopping Dean from talking. “I shall inform the kitchens not to make Jarsakian food for our next meeting. Be sure to list everything a Salitian can stomach.”

He says it like it’s Dean’s fault for getting sick. And Dean believes him. Everything is his fault, and why won’t Michael love him -

Claws roars, now. The roar sounds like an attempt at showing everyone she’s angry, but it works, because Dean thinks about her instead of Michael.

“Next Friday, same time,” Michael says. This time, Dean doesn’t look into his eyes. “Do not disappoint me.”

Dean barely has the wit to drag the finger down his nose, and lips, and hurries out. Ignoring the Guards, Dean runs so fast, he’s choking on air when he reaches the Dungeon. He doesn’t run to Claws yet, listening to her direct him to...Castiel.

Castiel’s in the Dungeon kitchen, a small area with enough space for two people. There are various trinkets and kitchen tools Dean crashes into, making them fall on the ground. Castiel’s surprise turns into worry, and then fear.

“Dean?”

Dean slides to the ground, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He takes the leaves out of his pocket with a shaking hand, and wheezes, “F-forgot-”

Castiel springs into action the second he sees Dean’s wild eyes pleading. Disappearing through the door, he leaves Dean sobbing on the floor. His mind switches between loyalty and love for Michael, to absolute disgust at his own actions. Claws sings him songs through the bond, helping him with the pain until Castiel comes in, out of breath, and carrying a basket full of vials. Murmuring to himself, he checks some of the labels on the vials. Dean catches the words ‘gods-damned Samandriel’ and ‘this one’.

As he closes his eyes and lets himself be taken over by Michael, something cold drips on his lips, freezing all of his thoughts. His body goes rigid, taking in the antidote with a fight. Dean feels the same heat burn through him, the one he felt when Claws hatched. It’s mind-blowing, but it doesn’t hurt.

All of his thoughts about Michael disappear, and when he opens his eyes, Castiel’s looking at him
with those blue, blue eyes. It smells like garlic and cooked meat in the small kitchen. It’s so small, Dean’s legs touch the other side of the cabinets. Castiel sits so close that Dean can smell mint, and something sharp, distinct and very pleasant. Castiel gives him a tall cup of water. Dean drinks like he’s dying from thirst.

“You didn’t eat the Morikae leaves, I take it.”

It’s not even accusing. Castiel doesn’t condone Dean for his mistake, which brings relief and embarrassment. “I was so nervous, I forgot,” he croaks.

Castiel helps him up, Dean’s legs are still shaking a little. Castiel says, “Morikae leaves are a wonderful choice, and I am sure Samandriel meant well. But they do have a curious side-effect that ends up in you sleeping for days after the initial 12 hours of them working.”

Dean stares at the leaves. “What did you give me then?”

“A brew of my own. I use it whenever I have to be with Michael.”

Dean sips more water. He remembers Benny. “Claws pulled me out of whatever Michael cast on me. I told him I wasn’t feeling well because of the food. Will Benny be alright?”

Castiel winces. “He’s going to be punished,” he says. “But nothing life-threatening. Benny is very good at his job.”

“Does Michael know I visit him?”

“No,” Castiel explains. “Benny isn’t stupid. His staff have their own ways of dealing with Michael’s magic. Lafallkans are very good at making medicine.”

“I’m having trouble understanding how he managed to pull me under. The pull was so strong, I was about to give in.”

“Michael has done a lot of stupid things in his life,” Castiel says. He starts making food again, as if nothing happened. Dean likes that about him a lot. “One of them was messing with magic Jarsaki have forbidden since the First King. Michael wasn’t this bad when he was little. Believe me or not, my brother used to be a ray of sunlight, and we would play in our old Castle near the sea. The Novaks were never violent, we were never a threat to the throne. When my sister Anna was born, we celebrated by bringing her to Patheo. She met Queen Mary Winchester, just as Mary was about to give birth to her own child. Michael was really young then, sixteen, at the least. I traveled with them, barely eight years old. Mary was very beautiful, green eyes and long blonde hair,” Castiel pauses. “Michael saw the Keep with his own eyes, and something awoke inside of him. It took a few years for him to master the language of the Zhwai. He isn’t fluent, but it’s enough to work to his advantage. He can easily enchant things, feelings, and listen in on conversations, but the latter is tricky, sometimes he’s unable to tune in that well, it all depends on the environment and the speaker. Mary and John Winchester died four years after we introduced Anna, and Michael pronounced himself King and conqueror.”

“But he isn’t truly royal,” Dean says, his heart thundering.

“No,” Castiel shakes his head. “Michael murdered our own parents, and two of my other brothers who were against Michael’s plans. Gabriel and Gadreel were good men. To this day, I cannot forgive Michael for what he has done. He only left me alive because I had an uncanny friendship with the Dragossi our family had for ages.”

Dean thinks about it for a second. He places a comforting hand on Castiel’s shoulder. To Dean’s
surprise, Castiel leans into the touch, head bowed, and eyes closed. “Is there any way of taking Michael’s throne? Anyone with royal blood, a person who could challenge him and win?”

Castiel sighs, and finishes making the food. It’s perfectly cooked, but Dean still doesn’t want to eat. His stomach feels queasy. “Mary and John had a child, who must be at least twenty-four by now. Nobody knows if the true heir survived Michael’s attack. There are legends, I’m sure you’ve heard.”

Dean nods.

Castiel continues, “According to some of them, an item that belonged to the Winchester family will be found by the heir, and the heir will take back the throne. But these are legends only. Michael uses his dark magic, and there’s no limit to what he wants to do to this world. Whatever happens, we have to stick together and save ourselves, before he destroys us too.”

Dean feels a kind of newfound respect for Castiel. He misjudged Castiel big time. Castiel Novak isn’t the secret he thought he’d never uncover. Warmth fills Dean’s chest when he thinks about Castiel, so he nods, and says, “If I can help in any way, tell me.”

Castiel then smiles. The first, real, true smile Dean has seen throughout the time he has been here. It’s sparks even more warmth down Dean’s spine, and it’s wildly confusing, because he hasn’t felt this way for ages, not since Aaron. Fuck. This isn’t good.

Castiel says “You’re a wonderful man, Dean.”

They’re smiling at each other for a while. Then, Castiel looks away, a red tint on his cheeks. He pulls out two plates, looks pointedly at Dean and then at the pan full of freshly cooked meat.

Dean stops him, “It’s alright. I’m not hungry. I’ll go see Claws and Sam.”

“Oh,” Castiel says. “I forgot to tell you. Sam starts working with Charlotte in the Archives tomorrow. Would you like to join Samandriel and him to meet her?”

Dean beams. “Yeah, absolutely.”

“And don’t forget your report.”

Okay, fuck. “It’s nearly done anyway,” Dean lies.

Castiel nods, still smiling a little, and Dean leaves, practically running to Claws. She meets him eagerly, crawls inside of his shirt, and sends pictures of Dean’s room. She clearly doesn’t want to sleep here alone, and Dean doesn’t want to let her. He feels safe with her, safer than anywhere else in the Keep. He sends her a different picture, of Sam and parchment. “Buddy, we’re gonna go and write today. You sure you want to tag along?”

She squeaks, excitement running through the bond.

Dean hopes Samandriel won’t notice the missing ruby bag, and vows to bring her back to the nest in the morning. Her claws don’t hurt his skin anymore, and he carries the feeling of safety with him.
Hellhound

Chapter Summary

Warning: Consent issues with Michael (nothing sexual, just really uncomfortable, personal space issues)

Castiel hasn’t slept all night, thinking about Michael and his family; instead he opted for writing more reports for Michael and his guards. His hand hurts from scribbling on old parchment, ink stains his fingers, and he wipes his clean hand down his face, yawning, when Dean storms in through the red curtain, out of breath.

Something wriggles in his shirt, and Claws peeks out through the linen, peeping. Dean looks slightly flustered when Castiel simply looks at him, deadpan.

“You took her out of the Dungeon,” Castiel says, somewhat impressed and a little bit pissed.

“She wanted to go,” Dean explains. “I don’t like it when she’s cooped up here alone. Imagine if you had to stay inside four walls for a week.”

Castiel doesn’t tell him he’s been living like this for half of his life. He just says, “Please don’t do that. Samandriel will take her out when she feels restless from now on.”

“Can I join?”

“If you’re not assigned chores at the moment of her walkies, you can go, yes.”

Dean snorts, eyes sparkling. “You said walkies.”

Castiel stares at him, confused.

Dean just waves him off, refusing to explain what was so funny. “I have your report.”

Castiel extends his hand, and Dean places a sheet of parchment on his waiting palm. It’s crumpled a little bit, as if Dean clutched it with a little bit of force, but otherwise it’s nicely written. Albeit wiggly. Inconsistent. As if there were three different hands writing it.

Castiel pauses, pursing his lips. “Did you...write this yourself?”

“Yes,” Dean answers quickly.

“Are you sure no one else wrote it,” Castiel says, pointing at one particular paragraph where it looks as if a child wrote it.
“Yup,” Dean says, sweat forming on his forehead. “It’s all me.”

Castiel narrows his eyes, until Dean visibly tenses.

“Okay,” Dean continues, puffing out his cheeks. He puts his hands on his hips, and looks down, biting his lip. “Okay, I kind of. Lied. A little.”

Castiel listens intently, and says. “Sam, then?”

“No,” he answered. “I didn’t lie that I wrote all of it. I just. I failed to mention that I uh. Can’t - couldn’t write.”

Castiel stops short, eyes widening. Dean’s blush goes down his neck, which is sort of adorable. Castiel looks down at the parchment, and sees that some of the letters have a certain style to them, unmistakably Dean’s doing. His progress is clearly evident. The last paragraph looks less wobbly than the whole text, but it’s credible. It’s wonderful.

“When,” Castiel says, a little breathless. “When did you start learning?”

Dean shrugs, still avoiding Castiel’s eyes. “A few days ago.”

“Days?”

Dean puffs his cheeks out. “I didn’t have time to learn before,” he explains. “I really tried. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Castiel’s incredibly impressed Dean learned how to write in a few fucking days. That is unheard of. He had to learn over the course of months, and here is proof Dean wrote a report in a few days without having previously learned at all.

“This is amazing, Dean,” Castiel blurts out. “You’re incredible.”

Dean gapes. The blush grows stronger. His inability to accept a compliment is surreal, and really cute. Again? Cute? Castiel has to stop this nonsense. So he clears his throat, and says, “Well done. I’m really proud of you.”

It’s beautiful seeing Dean go from embarrassed, to excited, to really pleased with himself. You can see every single emotion cross Dean’s face in a matter of seconds.

The silence between them is comfortable. And Dean decides to ruin it.

“So,” he says. “Sam starts his job today.”

“He does,” Castiel confirms.

“And I’m allowed to go with him.”

“You are,” Castiel says. His cheeks feel hot. “Samandriel is going to come here shortly. Please leave Claws in her nest.”

Claws, who seemed to be disinterested in their conversation, peeks at them again, sleepy. She huffs some smoke out through her nose. Dean laughs nervously, “She’s angry because it ain’t her nest.”

“Red Rubies think of their bond-holders as nests,” Castiel explains, as he did to Michael.

Dean looks down at Claws. “I ain’t your gods-damned nest, Claws. You can’t sleep on me.”
“She has a different understanding of a nest. Other Dragossi sleep, mate, and live in a nest. To Claws, you are her home, but you are not a bed. And surely, you’re not her mate.”

Claws slithers inside of Dean’s shirt.

Dean laughs. “Wow,” he says. “She really is something.”

Castiel wants to tell him more about Dragossi, but Samandriel comes in from the Nest area, stretching. He looks well-rested, and somewhat gloomy, like a storm.

Castiel and Dean look at him, standing there. Castiel’s holding a parchment, and he’s as red as a strawberry. Dean looks even more flustered. Samandriel frowns.

“Did I interrupt you two?”

Castiel nearly slams the parchment on the table, stuttering. “No. No, you didn’t. Didn’t interrupt.”

Dean is at a loss for words, so Samandriel just shrugs. Points at the curtain. “I’m going to get Sam. Are you coming?”

Dean just nods.

As they’re going through the curtain, Dean looks back, his gaze lingering on Castiel’s. It’s unnerving, knowing that Dean sees him clearly. What a weird feeling, as if Castiel’s in between understanding what’s going on in his stomach and head, and imagining the blooming feeling is real.

They’re gone, and Castiel’s heart hammers.

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Sam is ecstatic.

“I’ve heard the Archives are bigger than any library in Jarsaki. How big is it exactly?”

Samandriel, annoyed with the both of them acting like children, simply says, “It’s big. Could you two stop acting like you’re twelve?”

“I look older than you,” Dean retorts.

Samandriel laughs, hard and short. Dean fails to see the humor, but follows both of them to the Archives.

It’s a long way there, the stone stairs are steep and well-worn, probably used by Maids. It’s getting colder, even though they’re climbing up. The climb isn’t easy, and Dean’s catches his breath when they reach a beautifully decorated door, the only one Dean really likes in the Keep. It looks old, with lines and drawings from the old Jarsaki, when money and gems weren’t the most popular way of decorating. The wood is sturdy, unpolished. Smells like home. Dean touches the wood, thinking it had to be hard getting the door attached to the stone. It’s older than the Keep, which means it had to come from somewhere else.

Samandriel opens the door. Sam is already on the tips of his toes, trying to see what’s inside.
Dean can’t stop himself for saying *wow* out loud.

The Archives are old, probably as old as the Giants. Before the Keep Giant turned to stone, and became home to the Royal family, the Archives were in the old Palace, near the Crow Sea. Stone walls keep the paper dry, and the shelves are all stone.

It’s the statues that make it incredibly breathtaking in the first place. Every shelf is carved into a story. Old Jarsakian legends are etched into the stone. Winged creatures. Dragossi riders. Laume, Green Devils, Gods. It’s all there, with such detail, Dean takes it all in, practically inhaling the history surrounding him. The first big shelf has a few Laume statues, holding books in their hands. Their scattered hair hides the sinister looks on their faces. Dean notices corpses beneath their feet, the books symbolize their children, the ones they steal from horrible families. Dean loves everything about this, even if it feels unsettling when he looks into their stone eyes. As he looks at the second shelf behind the Laume one, something really familiar hits him. The shelf itself is simple. Three figures stand, with bags at their feet, all filled with books. The Devils have hooves, one of them is wearing a single boot on their hoof. Everything about them is pointed. They look human, but distinctly gorgeous enough to feel as if they’re not from this world. There’s a Green Devil that has a face similar to someone he knows. He’s surprised to see the person looking back at him.

Sam looks at the same shelf, mouth open. “Doesn’t that look like Plea-”

“Who comes here!” A booming voice comes from the inside of Archives. Samandriel walks over to the first shelf, and takes a book in his hand, bored.

Dean and Sam look at each other, then at Samandriel, who stays silent.

Sam, then, “I,” he stutters. “I’m Sam. I’m going to work here.”

A breeze comes, blowing Sam’s hair up. It’s chilly, but not bad. Dean enjoys it, until the owner of the voice walks over from the shelves, her hand touching the stone tentatively.

Air leaves Dean’s lungs. Charlotte, the bonded soul of the Archives, is every bit the nightmare walking. Sam looks as surprised and interested as Dean. Her skin is half dark and oozing with a world that doesn’t belong here, and the other half is here, grounded, human. Her smile is warm, her hair flows in thin air. It’s red as the sunset, like the fire in Dean’s hearth. How can a creature this horrifying be this welcoming?

“Sam,” she says, her voice as warm as hot tea. “I am really excited to finally meet you!”

Sam gulps down his nerves, and extends his hand.

She takes a step back, and then explains. “I shouldn’t touch you when I am like this. My body decides where and when it wants to *be*, and I don’t want to drag you into the afterlife by accident.”

Sam wipes his sweaty hand on his linen pants.

Dean releases his breath. “You’re Charlotte,” he says.

“Charlie,” she says, happily. She’s so bubbly, and wonderful, and Dean likes her instantly. “Charlotte makes me feel old as fuck.”

Scratch that. He *loves* her. Sam seems to like her a lot, too.

“This is the apprentice,” Sam says. “He’s Evia-”
Charlie just waves it off, and beckons them all to follow her. As they’re walking through the archives, all of the statues around them seemingly alive, and the smell of books overwhelms them, she says, “You don’t have to lie to me. Samandriel and Castiel already informed me. Once someone tells me a secret, I am forever bound to keep it. Simple, and efficient. Easier to deal with Michael.”

Samandriel never says anything. It’s weird, but Dean doesn’t press. Instead, he goes, “I have never met anyone like you. What does it feel like sitting in between death and life?”

“It has its moments,” Charlie says. Her cheerful tone doesn’t falter. She walks like moving art, her hair swirled in the air as fluidly as she moves. “If I had more people visit me, I’d be happier. Monthly visits from Castiel aren’t enough, even though he’s very fun to talk to when he’s drunk.”

“You’ve seen him drunk?” Dean asks, giddy.

She laughs, head thrown back. They reach a small chamber, with a kitchenette, and a table set for five people. There’s ceramic cups filled to the brim with hot tea, and pastries set in the middle. Dean hasn’t eaten yet, so it’s a welcoming sight.

She gestures for them to sit down. “I have seen him drunk, I have seen him as a teenager, and I have seen him grow. I feel like a sister he has never asked for.”

It smells really nice here, and Dean plops down, Sam joins him instantly. Samandriel still stands, until Charlie smiles sadly at him. He looks like he wants to talk, but nothing comes out of his mouth.

Charlie tells him, “I’ll show them around. You don’t have to stay here.”

Samandriel moves, looking straight into her eyes. A smile plays on his lips, and he nods, before disappearing among the shelves.

“She’s acting weird,” Sam says, looking back at where Samandriel stood.

Charlie lowers her voice. Her skin swirls with every color. Dean swears he can see stars exploding on her shoulder. “He doesn’t want to be heard. Michael’s magic affects him differently.”

Dean would like to know more, but Sam is really excited about being here. Charlie pushes the cups toward them, her fingers look as human as it can get. “What about you? Are you under his -” Dean points somewhere in the general direction of Michael’s chambers. “-influence?”

“Castiel didn’t tell you? The Archives are the only place in the Keep where you can talk about Michael all you want. Curse him, plan to kill him, whatever you want. He can’t hear you. The Archives listen to me, and protect the secrets within.”

“But Samandriel -” Sam starts.

“Samandriel is the only exception. It’s better for him to stay silent when he’s here. Which reminds me,” she turns to Dean. “Do not bring your tiny Dragossi here. She might be well-behaved, but I don’t want her burning down my books. And, I don’t want Michael to know she’s here.”

“I don’t think she can read,” Dean answers. He drinks the tea, which is pleasantly warm. Charlie laughs. Sam smiles. It’s a beautiful moment, sitting like this with his brother, and a creature who isn’t human, but feels like an old friend.

They talk about Sam, and how he’s going to help Charlie. Charlie explains it’s hard for her to concentrate for a long period of time, which means she doesn’t do a lot of work here. She tries, but it’s hard living in the afterlife when you still have chores on the ground. Sam asks about the
Archives; what he’s supposed to do, how long he’s going to be working, and Dean tunes all of this out. He thinks about his own apprenticeship, and Claws. Claws is sleeping, so when Dean tunes in, he sees his face, Samandriel’s to an extent, and piles of unpolished rubies. His mouth waters, but not because he’s hungry for gems.

Dean excuses himself after he finishes the tea, asking if it’s okay if he wanders around the Archives for a bit. Charlie tells him to be careful of the rats running around, and not to touch the books that look fragile. Then, proceeds to talk to Sam.

Walking away from the room, Dean finds himself alone among the books, parchments, maps. The smell reminds him so much of Sam’s room, whenever he brought books from the library in Rathri. Dean drags his fingertips over the book covers, closes his eyes to feel how old they are. There’s so much information surrounding him, it’s overwhelming to think that he still has to learn how to read better to access everything the Archives have to offer. He walks around the shelves, all telling different stories. He recognizes some of the legendary creatures, but some, he doesn’t understand. Creatures with no heads, or hands. Men with lightning bolts in their hands, standing on top of rocks. Small animal-looking things that have giant ears, holding onto kites. It dawns on Dean that the stone sculptures aren’t built from the Keep Giant. Every stone is different, some of them have natural coloring that catches his eye. It must have taken Jarsakians years to make the sculptures, and drag them all the way up here. It’s impressive.

Dean takes one of the books from the shelf surrounded by grass-snakes. The book is surprisingly light beneath his fingers. Dean settles down on the ground, opening up the book. It’s written in plain Jarsakian, so Dean starts reading, slowly, yet surely. It’s difficult for him to piece words together, but once he’s confident he understands the full sentence, he reads it again, out loud. The book is about forging swords from various metals around Seratonia. Every country has different resources, and different forging techniques Dean barely understands. It’s mind-numbingly boring, but he reads intently. Once he reaches a passage about how some swords have souls trapped inside, Sam appears, with Charlie behind him.

“I’m going to start early tomorrow!” Sam says excitedly.

Dean places the book back where he found it, and stands up, dusting off his pants. Charlie’s face is human again, the swirling black galaxy gone from her cheeks. Dean finds that he likes her either way. “That’s awesome, dude,” he says, ruffling his hair. Sam slaps Dean’s hand away, as always.

Charlie nods at the books. “You like reading?”

Dean doesn’t feel like lying to her. “I’m learning how to. Sammy here is teaching me.”

Charlie’s face lights up. “I can recommend some very good books! Easy to read, and perfect for practice.”

“That’d be really cool of you,” Dean says, genuinely. Charlie leads him to one of the shelves, and grabs a few books that look well-read. She hands it to him, and her fingers feel warm when he touches them. It looks like it’s safe to be around her when her skin decides it wants to be in the real world for a while.

“You can come here anytime!” she says. “I’d like to have some company, and we can talk about books, or something. It gets really lonely here, so please don’t think that you’re going to be intrusive.”

Dean beams at her. “I’ll make sure Castiel lets me visit you more than once a month.”
“Drag him here with you,” she says. Sam is going through a few books that have caught his interest. “He’s cooped up in that Dungeon, and it has been a long time he had time to relax.”

“Yeah, his people skills are rusty.”

Charlie crosses her hands on her chest, still smiling. “He likes you. He’s not good at making new friends, but I’m sure you two can work it out. He came over a few days ago, asking for a Salitian courting book, Seven Giants know for what. We talked about you for a good hour.”

Dean blushes a little. “I don’t know, Charlie. How can a thief and a Dragossi Whisperer be friends?”

She winks at him. “If he can be friends with a half-dead Archivist, I think he can make room for a green-eyed thief. Don’t underestimate yourself, man.”

When Sam and Dean go back to the Dungeons alone, Sam goes to see the Dragossi. Dean walks around until he finds Castiel curled up in the cushioned chair in the small library. He looks peaceful sleeping like this, but Dean quickly runs back to the Curtain Hall, finds a wool blanket, and goes back to cover Castiel with it.

Castiel doesn’t wake up, and Dean leaves him like this. With a smile, Dean goes to Claws. He can make friends with Castiel. The thought leaves Dean feeling light, and when Claws greets him, sleepily curling inside of his shirt, Dean knows stealing an egg wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

***

Outside, the weather changes from snowstorms to subdued frost, ice covers the roads, and merchants have less to sell due to caravans waiting for better conditions for travel. The Keep Giant is warm, save for the few rooms that never change, staying as cold as they do throughout the year. Castiel sleeps under three covers, but still wakes up and walks down to the Dungeons with cold toes and fingers. He welcomes the soft heat when he opens up the red curtain. Samandriel is sitting behind Castiel’s table, playing with a few vials, dumping their ingredients into a bowl.

“Where’s Dean?” Castiel asks.

“Oh, so that’s his real name,” Samandriel answers, looking straight into the bowl which simmers with no heat underneath. “I called him Freckles in my head, you know, because I haven’t been properly introduced.”

“He’s been here nearly a month, I thought you two were properly acquainted.”

“And I’ve been here for years,” Samandriel shrugs, dunking a finger in and tasting the slop. It looks mildly disgusting. “It would be nice finding out he’s from a Brothel from you, instead of my own sources.”

“You mean from the man who works at the same Brothel?”

Samandriel pours the substance into a ceramic jar, the grey smoke smells like death. “He has told me you’ve met.”

“We have. I’m wondering why am I only now finding out there’s a Brothel Boy in your bed from time to time. From my rings.”
Samandriel glares at Castiel. “Pleasure doesn’t take payment from me. We’ve got a different...arrangement.”

Castiel sighs. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m a little under the weather. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“Is this you talking, or the fact that Pleasure told you I’ve been complaining about you?”

“Both.”

Dean storms in through the curtain, seemingly out of breath. His wild eyes make Samandriel and Castiel freeze in place. “Michael is coming,” he says. “He wants to see Claws.”

“Shit,” Samandriel says, and disappears through the storage, clutching the jar close to him.

Castiel places a hand on Dean’s shoulder, and says, quickly, “Go get her, and take her to the Dungeon lake. Talk to her through the bond, tell her how to act around Michael. She will listen to you, hopefully. Send her your memories of other small Dragossi training, I’m sure she can imitate the same warrior poses like them.”

Dean nods, and hurries down the small corridors, his dark linen clothes rustling with his speed.

Castiel hurriedly hides some of his notes on Dean and Claws’ relationship, makes the table look like it hasn’t been cleaned, and hears the unmistakable sound of Michael’s encrusted boots hitting the stone ground. Gordon enters first, and it’s a little bit eerie seeing Michael come in second, with no other Guards tailing him. Michael’s piercing gaze shows how disgusted he is to even step inside of Castiel’s territory, but he walks in with his pride on his sleeve. Castiel greets him with the royal greeting, and Michael only scoffs.

“Where is Master Evia?”

“Apprentice, my King,” Gordon says, his creepy smile reaching his eyes.

Michael looks around the room, as if it’s the first time he’s here. As if he’s judging Castiel’s choice of living.

“He is preparing Darkness for viewing,” Castiel says, the palms of his hands sweaty. “There wasn’t enough time for her to adjust, with an arrival so abrupt.”

“Enough talking,” Michael holds a hand up. His cloak is shimmering, and Castiel recognizes the green of emeralds embroidered into the fabric. “Show me the way.”

Castiel’s muscles scream from the tension as he walks in front of both Michael and Gordon, the warmth he felt in the morning is all but gone. Michael doesn’t look at other Dragossi, not even when a few of them hiss when he walks past them. Jarra peeks out through her nest, but swiftly goes back in, avoiding Michael all together. Castiel trusts Dragossi judgment above anyone else, and knows there’s a reason why they’re so adamant about not contacting Michael at all.

Dean waits, standing barefoot on the sand, with Claws sitting in the sand, her small head held up high, as a royal Dragossi should greet her King. Castiel stops, letting Michael and Gordon pass him. He stays in the background, heart beating loudly.

“Evia,” Michael says, walking close in an attempt to touch Dean. Claws lets out a small growl, which makes Michael stop. Dean’s surprise doesn’t show on his face, only in the way his hands clutch his shirt. “Oh. Quite a personality she acquired. Is it safe to touch her?”
Dean’s entire demeanor is tense to the point of his forehead sweating, but it’s not because he’s nervous. Castiel has seen him nervous numerous times. It feels more like anger he’s hiding within, with all of his might trying to refrain from hitting Michael. Gordon looks as suspicious as ever, standing on the side and smiling to himself. “She is overprotective of her teachers, Your Majesty. Red Rubies are hostile toward people they do not know. Surely, her feelings will change over time,” Dean says, his Salitian accent impeccable. Castiel wants to ask him where he’s learned to talk like this later. If there even is a later, with Claws acting like Michael is her number one enemy.

Michael kneels in the sand, careful not to dirty his coat and armor. “Come,” he says, beckoning Claws to him. “My sweet Darkness. Come to your King.”

Castiel notices Dean’s closed eyes. Claws does the same, seeing the images he’s sending her through their bond. It’s painfully obvious to see they’re in complete sync, but Castiel hopes Gordon and Michael don’t notice.

“Come,” Michael repeats, a little forcefully.

Claws opens her red eyes, the cold stare matches Michael’s in its intensity. She walks over to him, as slow as ever, with her wings tight to her body. Dean’s doing his best to show her as a timid creature, as one who is submissive, instead of dominant. Once she reaches Michael’s hands, she stops.

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Dean winces, biting his lip. Something is wrong.

“Well?” Michael says, raising his eyes to Dean’s, who has his eyebrows furrowed from trying to talk some sense into Claws. “Why isn’t she perching on my hand?”

“She must be nervous to meet a new person, my King,” Dean explains, pointedly looking at Claws. To a stranger, it looks like Dean is a strict man, but to Castiel, Dean looks like he’s sharing his anger with Claws. “It takes time for her to adjust-”

Michael doesn’t wait for Dean’s sentence to end. All he does is say the only word Castiel knows in the Zhwai language.

“Paklusk,” he says. Obey.

Michael’s veins turn a dark grey, then pulses with the magic he isn’t supposed to ever use. The most terrifying thing about the language of Zhwai is that anyone can use it. Anyone can learn it, and anyone can curse themselves with dark magic. Castiel’s head swims, listening to the flow of those syllables. His body moves on its own, turning to Michael, ready to do whatever Michael wants him to. His head is in the clouds, and only a small part of his mind screams at him to stop listening to Michael talk.

Claws moves as well. Dean looks like he’s confused, but then his hand is reaching out, slowly. The Red Ruby ends up in Michael’s hands, her black scales touching his armor. Castiel can’t figure out why it feels so wrong seeing her like this, but he doesn’t move.

It happens in almost an eyeblink. Castiel sees Claws opening her mouth full of sharp teeth, and Michael’s scream echoes throughout the Dungeon. She draws blood, easily biting through Michael’s skin on his hand.

Castiel goes back to himself gradually, the clouds in his head clearing, and he sees Michael falling down on the sand, trying to shake Claws off.

Dean moves faster, trying to get her off Michael, but Michael hits Dean straight in the jaw, sending him on the ground as well. “Do not touch me!” Michael shouts, his voice booming. Michael’s hair is
scattered on his face, no longer the posh tidy greased back hairstyle he prefers. Almost feral looking, he manages grabbing the Claws’ tail, and pulls her off. She’s in pain as she jumps toward Dean, into his waiting arms. Dean’s lip is bleeding, but his face is full of relief.

Michael scrambles to get up, his armor is full of sand, and his eyes turn black. He shouts in full Zhwai, but nothing happens. The Dungeon nullifies most of his magic.

Castiel holds up his hand, eyes wide and scared. “Michael,” he mumbles, scattered. “Let me treat your wound—”

Michael turns and hits Castiel in the face, just as hard as he did Dean. Castiel knows this had to come, so he turns his face just enough for Michael to barely scrape it. He goes down, though, for the sake of a show. “Don’t! Call! Me! Michael! You absolute scum.”

Gordon is just as distressed, but he follows when Michael stomps out, shouting back at them, “Train her. If she bites the King ever again, I’m going to murder all of you!”

Castiel doesn’t go after them, instead he hurries to check on Dean and Claws. Claws whines, clinging to Dean’s shirt, and he pets her, holding her close to his heart, calming her down. There’s blood clinging to her mouth, and some of it ends up staining Dean’s shirt.

“Are you okay?” Castiel says, wanting to reach out and comfort Dean, but Dean just shakes his head.

“She’s going to be okay. I’m not leaving her alone tonight,” he says, voice shaking.

“Okay,” Castiel says, lifting his eyes to see Samandriel standing there, since the coast is clear, now. “Alright. You need each other.”

Samandriel holds his hand over his heart, worried and angry. Dean grabs Castiel’s hand, and says, with so much feeling, it makes Castiel’s legs shake, “Stay with us.”

“I will,” Castiel says.

And he does. All through the night, he stays with them in Claws’ nest. He falls asleep in the chair long after Dean and Claws.

***

Every second day of the week, Castiel trains Dean to fight. It’s been a month since Dean started the apprenticeship, and he’s improving as quick as lightning. It’s wildly unimaginable to Castiel, being this quick at learning. Castiel often thinks when he watches Dean clean out Dragossi nests, that if Dean had time to study when he was younger, he would’ve changed the world. Maybe it isn’t too late.

He gives Dean the antidote before Dean goes to see Michael every Friday, and Dean comes back equally white-faced. Castiel starts waiting for him from that fateful Friday after Claws’ bit Michael, with some food and mead at hand. Dean doesn’t talk about Michael, and Castiel doesn’t ask. Dean has a small scar on his lip, and only tells Castiel that there weren’t any repercussions from Michael about Claws. They just sit, and talk about Dragossi until Dean has to go see Sam. It’s becoming a sort of tradition for them. Castiel brings pastries for all of them a few times a week. Sam loves them,
and Dean looks very happy when he sees Sam get excited over some sweets.

Once, Dean mentions reading a book about swords when he first went to see Charlie. His interest in swords is uncanny, and Castiel tells him they’re going to have sword training soon after Dean starts getting good at fighting with his bare hands. Castiel sees Dean carrying books wherever he goes, be it chores, or when he goes to see Benny. Dean visits Charlie regularly as well. Castiel notices how much light Dean brings into their day, because when Castiel goes to visit Charlie as per usual, he finds Dean sitting in between some of the shelves, reading loudly to Charlie and Sam, who are cleaning out old parchments. Charlie has less darkness swirling on her skin, her body chooses to stay here to listen to Dean’s voice. Dean reads with confidence, and if his voice wavers, or he doesn’t read the word correctly, none of them seem bothered at all.

“Am I interrupting anything?” Castiel says, when they all stop short. Dean smiles at him warmly. He taps the place next to him. Castiel complies, kneeling on the ground. Dean thumbs through the pages, showing him how much he’s read already. Charlie and Sam move further, leaving them both be.

“I didn’t know books were so much fun,” Dean says, the genuine happiness in his voice setting up a fire in Castiel’s lungs. It’s hard to look away from Dean when he’s so giddy. “I talked to Benny about Lafallka, and he told me their Legends are crazy even by his standards. I’m reading a collection of stories by this one dude who served under King Belvieni the Third, he was the one who established trading posts between the Main Land of Seratonia and the island of Lafallka. So this guy was a great writer, and sailed for like ten years. All of these stories are hilarious stuff that happened when he was on board. He lived in Jarsaki for a few years, too!”

Castiel takes his eyes away from Dean’s face to look at the pictures in the book. Dean shows him some of the caricatures apparently drawn by the same man. Pressed books are cheaper, and this one is surprisingly well-kept, even if it is held by meager glue. Dean holds the book as if it’s made from gold, carefully turning the fragile pages.

“I don’t really have the time to read books for my own entertainment,” Castiel says apologetically. “The last non-Dragossi related book I read was some fairy-tales.”

Dean’s eyebrows go up. “Then you have to read this. It’s hilarious. It has one chapter where the guy fights his own shadow after drinking all night.”

Castiel takes the book out of Dean’s hands. Dean’s so excited, Castiel promises him he’ll read it before sleep. The idea doesn’t seem so bad, actually.

Charlie reappears again, holding a few books in her hands. She hands them to Castiel. “Tell her I said hi, and there’s a letter in one of the books.”

The tips of Castiel’s lips curl up as he holds the books close to him. “I will. She’s going to be very happy to know you’re thinking about her.”

“Who?” Dean asks.

Charlie blushing in galaxies. It’s more cute than frightening, when you know her. “For Anna. You know. The Keep’s Goddess.”

“Your sister,” Dean breathes out. “I forgot she lives here. I’ve met a few Gods before, but both of them lived in their Temples.”

“Anna doesn’t have the luxury of living away from my brother,” Castiel says, his voice full of sorrow. The comfortable atmosphere is clouded with sadness. “She is a Healing Goddess, so why
would Michael give her to the public? He feels like she owes him because he decided to leave her alive.”

Charlie has her eyes cast downward. “She lives where it’s cold, and Michael doesn’t even ask any of the Maids to help her with the broken window.”

They sit in silence for a while, until Castiel takes a deep breath, and gets up. “I’ll give her the books later this week -”

“-can I come with?” Dean interrupts, eyes pleading. Castiel finds himself unable to say no to that face. It’s becoming a habit of his, letting Dean have his way with everything.

“Yes,” Castiel answers, thinking it might be a good idea. Dean’s answering grin is enough of a thank you. “She would love to meet you.”

“She knows you as Evia, though,” Charlie says apologetically. “We can’t risk her telling Michael about you. Anna has to endure him more than all of us together.”

“I don’t mind,” Dean says. “I want to ask if she has any books to recommend.”

Charlie laughs out loud. “That’s all you want to ask her?”

“Look, I only talk to five people here, I’d really like someone else to bother in this gods-forsaken place.”

Castiel feigns shock, putting up his hand on his chest. “Aren’t we enough?”

Dean’s eyes meet Castiel’s, and there’s a dangerous spark between them. “Depends,” Dean says, voice hushed, suddenly.

Sam pitches in, holding a stack of dusty books. “If you two start this again, I’m going to throw up.”

Dean gestures between himself and Castiel. “This? This, Sam, is called friendship. I’m not starting this again, because there’s no again. We’re the definition of continuity.”

Something inside of Castiel blooms, hard and fast. The feeling is grateful, worthy of everything he went through to get to this moment. He stares at Dean as if he hung the moon. Sam only groans, and goes away to place the books in their rightful places.

Castiel smiles like an idiot the rest of the day, refusing to explain why when Sam andriel asks.

***

Dean is drowning.

It’s every bit as terrifying, as it always is. But he’s not drowning alone, this time. Castiel’s fingers are wrapped around his, clutching so tightly it hurts Dean’s hand. Dean refuses to let go, panicking when he can’t breathe. As he lifts his eyes to see Castiel drowning with him, Castiel’s gone. The grip disappears, too. Nothing feels the same without him by his side.

Dean tries going up, his arms grow weak with every stroke. The water feels suffocating around him, and it takes a moment to notice he’s swarmed with wild Dragossi. They’re smaller than the
domesticated ones, with less polished scales. Their wings are stronger, moving in a way that causes the water to whirl, which makes it even harder for Dean to try and swim up.

He’s going to die.

The fair haired woman comes, catching his flailing arms in hers. She’s beautiful, green-eyed, and looks at him lovingly, like she knows every inch of his skin, all of his thoughts, and all of his wishes. He’s calm now, even with all of this chaos.

It’s the first time he hears her speak, her voice sounds like the waves crashing against the sand.

“Find the sword,” she says, then looks down. Dean follows her gaze, and sees endless miles of stone, covered in corals. “Claim what is yours.”

He wakes up, drenched. Again. Like always. Dean shakes in his bed, lifts up the covers that feel suffocating. Jumping out of bed, he gets the soaked linen clothes off him in a rush, the collar of the shirt gets stuck for a second, and then he dresses in his dark-blue embroidered coat, with the same color breeches. He’s still shaking by the time he reaches the Dungeons, where Castiel sits behind his table. Castiel doesn’t sleep much. Dean’s not an idiot, he knows that the Keep’s walls and Michael are always a constant thought in Castiel’s head. Dean understands, because whenever he wants to fall asleep, he sees Michael’s hands reaching out for him, his morbid smile feels like a blade cutting through Dean’s skin. The Friday after Claws biting Michael, Dean had the unfortunate experience of Michael touching his bicep, his breath on Dean’s ear as Michael whispered he forgave them because Dean looked gorgeous that night. Dean blinks the memory away, when Castiel meets his worried eyes.

The table is covered with scribbled parchment, a few books. Quills, cups, various stupid decorations, scattered all over the room, as if Castiel was fidgeting around for a while. Dean looks around the mess, while Castiel waits for him to speak.

Dean puffs his cheeks out, lets out a whistle. “Can’t sleep, huh?”

The bags underneath Castiel’s eyes are the color of ash, but he just says, “My room is cold.”

Castiel’s empty look tells Dean everything. Castiel really needs to get out of this space. He worries too much about all of this, one night of rest can’t hurt. The Dragossi are all fed, warm, nothing will happen to them if Castiel takes a breather.

“Let’s go get a drink.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Let’s go get drunk. I’ve never been anywhere fancy around here.”

Castiel stares at Dean, then at his notes. “I have a lot of work to do.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “When have you ever went out for a drink with someone you work with? Does Samandriel invite you to parties often?”

Castiel pauses, short of breath. Dean walks around the table, and snatches the quill out of Castiel’s fingers. Castiel smells heavenly, something sweet and minty, as if he was eating pastries.

“We’re going out, then,” Castiel says. Dean looms over him, lips pursed. “Claws will be worried about you.”
Dean checks on her through the bond. She’s happily sleeping. “She’s asleep, and she’s no baby. I’ll tell her where we are if she wakes up.”

Castiel leads Dean through the curtain, and up the stone stairs. Once they reach the middle of the stairs between the Kitchens and the Dungeon, Castiel searches for something in the wall. Dean watches curiously as Castiel presses a spot in the stone, and a door opens with a breeze coming out. It’s ridiculously cold when they go inside. Dean’s bones chill to the core.

“You weren’t kidding when you said your room was cold,” Dean says, hugging himself.

“It gets like this whenever winter comes,” Castiel explains. He has a closet full of clothes, some really expensive with the gems Michael loves, some plain and worn. Castiel takes one of the dark coats similar to Dean’s, and pulls it on. He also takes a bag of rings. Dean stops him, showing his own bag of rings attached to his breeches.

“I’m paying,” he says. “I have never had a penny to spend recklessly, so we’re gonna do it today.”

“I can pay,” Castiel says.

“Recklessly,” Dean repeats. Then, shivers. “Gods, your room is horrible. Why don’t you go to one of the rooms near the Dungeon?”

Castiel drags the coat on, fixing the lapels. “Michael doesn’t let me.”

“You could just go and sleep anywhere, how is he going to know?”

“The walls have eyes, Dean.”

They get out of Castiel’s room. Dean doesn’t like the room one bit. It doesn’t look like Castiel ever lives in it. There are no decorations, and the bed looks lonely. For a single, stupid second, Dean thinks how warm it’d be to sleep with Castiel, with his strong arms wrapped around him.

What a fucking stupid thought.

They walk out through the passage Castiel has shown Dean before, out into the cold night. It still isn’t as cold as Castiel’s room, and Dean feels like they really needed this. It’s nice spending time with Castiel outside of work, Castiel’s exhaustion seems to be fading with every step.

They pass closed shops, dark alleys, then walk out into the main area of Patheo. The beautiful City Center, with dark-marble statues placed in the middle. The Giants, in smaller size, and people, extending hands to them. There’s a statue of Michael as well, but it doesn’t look as loved as the statue in the middle. On the edges of the center, there are multiple pubs and taverns open, all crowded and lively. Castiel shows Dean the way, while Dean takes it all in. Rathi was calm, compared with Patheo’s taverns. Everyone is dressed in black, as always, but there are a few colors here and there. Clearly people from other countries, visiting.

They reach one of the taverns ‘The Roadhouse’. Dean loves it almost instantly. Inside, people are rowdy, there’s singing, card games, people from all over the world salute each other as if old friends. Castiel steps around the groups of people, but Dean stands in the middle of everything with his mouth open, and eyes sparkling. He has never seen so many foreigners in one place. The colors are so vibrant, Dean’s eyes sting. About ready to shout, he feels someone’s fingers wrap around his wrist. Castiel beckons him to follow, and Dean does, slightly dizzy from so much exposure to a new world. There’s a familiar face in the crowd, Gordon, but Dean plays it down to his wild imagination, because when Dean does a double check, Gordon isn’t there anymore.
The settle in the back, where it’s less buzzing with people. Castiel orders some mead for both of them, the smiling blonde girl named Jo is very happy to serve them.

“We don’t get many Jarsakians here,” she says. “I start missing black clothing when it gets like this.”

Dean smiles at her. He’s still excited about everything here, so he asks her about the food. They order a heap of snacks to go with their drinks, and then they wait.

“You come here often?” Dean asks Castiel when they finally clink their drinks together.

Castiel almost chokes on his drink. “Was that flirtation?”

Dean feels bold. He feels so fucking bold, he downs his drink. The mead looks bright red in the metal cup. “We’re relaxing, aren’t we? I’m relaxing by flirting with you.”

Castiel settles for a slow sip of his drink. He stares at Dean as if he’s the weirdest person alive. “I can’t tell if you’re joking, or if you’re just really honest.”

Dean raises an eyebrow. His second drink comes just as fast. “I stole a gods-damned egg from you. How fucking honest do you think I am?”

“I think your honesty depends on your trust,” Castiel says. It’s really comfortable here, with the two of them sharing a drink, and some cheesy pastries. “We have established a friendship over the course of a month, and I do not think you lied to me even once.”

“I can’t believe you called this,” Dean gestures between them, just like he did when they visited Charlie. “An established friendship.”

“We are friends, though?” Castiel asks nervously.

Dean gapes at him. They are friends, absolutely, but whatever is growing inside of his chest doesn’t feel like friendship. “We are,” he says. He wants to flirt, wants to dance, wants to touch the nape of Castiel’s neck, and see Castiel beneath him. If the alcohol is getting to him, he doesn’t show it. “We are, Cas.”

The adorable little smile, the way Castiel handles himself in public is nothing like a royal should be. Castiel is simple, but there’s nothing simple about how Dean sees him. Dean wants to experiment with this feeling in his chest, no matter how dangerous it is.

They drink, and share stories from their childhood. Dean tells him stories about hysterical clients from the Brothel, like the one who wanted to be left alone in a Brothel room for a month, with only food and drink in the room. When asked if he thought the Brothel was an Inn with rooms for rent, he just looked at Crowley, saying You think I’m dumb, boy?, and Castiel talks about how Gabriel used to play pranks on all of them. Gabriel never did any harm to his brothers and sister, only timid little jokes like putting Castiel’s quills in jelly from the kitchens. Gradually, they’re getting drunk. Gradually, Dean’s chest fills with all of these thoughts about Castiel, with the undying wish to have him in his arms. It’d be wonderful to walk hand in hand, with Castiel’s cold fingers in between his. Fuck, when Castiel talks, Dean forgets about the world for a while.

“I had a necklace,” Dean tells Castiel. They’re on their sixth drink, and both are red in the cheeks. “I loved that fucking necklace so much. You have no idea. Sam gave it to me a few years back, when we thought we’d get separated. The necklace had like a small face of the Green Devil, but from the very old tales, the ones people don’t tell anymore, you know? One of our close friends told stories to Sam before bed, like about the times when the Green Devils were little Gods, how much they wanted to help people who were wronged. New Gods ruined everything, but some of the Devils
practice their old ways. I used to wear that necklace all the time, but the night you found me drowning, I left it on Sam’s table, just in case I didn’t come back. Sam probably didn’t get it either, and I keep thinking about it. Like, I really loved it.”

“You loved it?”

“Fuck yeah, I loved it.”

“But you can’t go back for it.”

“Nope.”

“You know,” Castiel says, pointing at him with the metal cup. “Your eyes are ridiculously green.”

Dean laughs, head falling back. It feels so good being here with Castiel. “Have you seen yours in the mirror? I swear, they look like the ocean.”

“Ohhh, have you ever been near the ocean? I used to swim naked.”

“Naked.”

“Gods, yes. I felt so free doing it, and I haven’t been able to anymore, because of fucking Michael.”

“I know, what a fucking asshole. He deprives the world of your naked ass swimming in the ocean! Wait, did you just say fucking?”

“I deserve to go swimming naked in the ocean, don’t I? I do! So what the hell am I doing here?”

Dean laughs so hard, he’s clutching his stomach. “You’re drinking with yours truly.”

Castiel looks at the cup. “I am,” after a pause, “Thank you. I needed this.”

“No need to thank me,” Dean retorts. “We should do this more often.”

It’s as if Castiel’s thinking about something, when his hand moves forward slowly. Almost undeciding, Castiel edges his fingers next to Dean’s. Dean almost loses all of his breath, when Castiel entwines their fingers together on the table. His thoughts come to a pleasant stop. They stay like this. For a short while. When Castiel starts moving away, realizing what he’s just done, Dean moves quick, and takes Castiel’s hand again.

Talking. Eating. Drinking. That’s what they do throughout the night, up until the early morning, when the Roadhouse feels emptier than before. Dean pays for everything, thanks Jo and her mother Ellen, and they go home.

They’re walking through the alleys of Patheo, but Dean doesn’t give a single fuck about the houses or the shops anymore. Castiel’s hand is still in his. Every other step, one of them squeeze, ever so lightly. Castiel doesn’t talk at all, until they reach the Keep’s secret entrance. The big toe of the Keep’s Giant looks menacing as Dean stops in place. Castiel looks back at him, somewhat perplexed Dean’s still there.

“Was this okay?” Dean breathes out.

Castiel looks like he’s frozen in time, breathing in the night air. The sun is rising somewhere, and he looks like a painting to Dean, the colors of Castiel shine through with such vibrancy. Without warning, Castiel steps up to him. Dean can feel Castiel’s breath on his lips, but they don’t kiss. Dean really likes Castiel’s lips, the chapped, yet warm skin has a pink tone that Dean commits to memory.
He keeps his eyes open the whole time, barely breathing, lest he ruins the moment.

“I...think so,” Castiel answers. Still, nothing happens. Their noses are barely touching.

Dean gulps down some of his nerves, and says. “You don’t have to sleep in there alone. My bed is warm.”

“So it is,” Castiel says. Then, he walks away through the entrance, and leaves Dean confused, aroused, in a storm of emotions. Castiel doesn’t come to his room, even though Dean waits. A sleepless night in a really warm, lonely bed.

***

Castiel does everything to forget what happened with Dean. He rewrites pages upon pages about the Dragossi version of a cold, the aftercare, how Dragossi wings weaken after even a small illness. Even that doesn’t help. At all. Not in the least bit. What it does is make Castiel fidget with the quill in his fingers, thinking how Dean’s hand felt against his.

Two days later, Castiel can’t fucking stop staring at Dean every possible second they’re near. The problem with this is that Castiel isn’t the only one unable to look away. They catch each other once or twice, and both find it very hard to draw their eyes away. When Dean walks past Castiel, their fingers brush, making Castiel’s heart thump harder. Inside of his head, he’s already in Dean’s arms, somewhere far away from here, probably standing in the ocean up to his knees. Castiel tries recalling his past lovers, how he felt about them touching him, but for the life of him, he can’t remember any of them making him want to close his eyes while holding hands, cherishing the moment.

Today, after their usual sparring practice and Dean’s report on the Blue Dragossi food cycles, Castiel offers Dean to come see Anna with him. Dean’s excited as a puppy, and the atmosphere between them is lifted, light as air.

He has to stop this feeling. Stop the staring. Stop.

Dean just about dies when they reach Anna’s room. The climb is hard, and even if Dean’s physique is getting better, he still gets winded up every hundred steps.

When he sees the glass door, and the snow, Dean’s smile disappears.

“That’s inhumane,” he whispers.

Castiel hates seeing Dean sad, but he understands. “Michael thinks she isn’t human, because she’s a Goddess. Hence, the cold.”

Dean’s determined look is noteworthy. Castiel does his usual routine of praying to her before entering. Anna runs up to the door, her red blazing hair contrasting beautifully with the snow beneath her bare feet. When she sees Dean through the glass, she smiles, blindingly.

“Evia!” she says, after opening the door. “Charlie told me you’re pretty. I didn’t think you’d be this pretty.”

Dean’s cheeks grow red. “Thank you, Lady Healing.”
“Please don’t call me that,” she says. “It feels too formal.”

Dean still bows to her, which she accepts. It’s so cold inside of her room, that Castiel’s fingers can barely move after two minutes of being there. The window is open wide, with the glass gone. Anna is dressed in a sheer dress, and it’s obvious she’s as cold as them both. Her healing powers help her treat the black flaky skin on her legs.

Castiel gives Anna the books from Charlie, and tells her about the letter, while Dean tends to the fire. They sit down in front of the hearth. Anna looks a bit better when there’s some heat inside.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Anna,” Dean says.

She looks so much like her brother. Sad, but strong. “I am honored you have climbed all of this way to see me, of all people. Thank you.”

Castiel can’t help but feel distraught. Dean’s poking at the fire, visibly shaken by Michael’s decision to alienate his sister. Castiel wants to tell him about everything Michael has done to the whole Keep, and about his plans with Zhwai, but Michael listens. Not always, but Castiel doesn’t want to risk it. With cold fingers, Castiel shows Anna the books, talks about Charlie, all the while Dean stays silent. Until.

Dean looks back at the window again, then at Castiel, who feels as if he’s being judged.

“I’m sorry,” Dean says. “Castiel, is there any way to cover that window? Anna is freezing to death.”

Anna holds a hand up. “Don’t. If Michael finds out, Castiel is as good as dead. I insisted he doesn’t do anything to the window.”

“I’m allowed to come here once a month,” Castiel says, voice low. Whenever he comes see her, he’s feeling even more and more useless. “I bring enough wood for Anna to last a few weeks.”

“The pile is too small,” Dean says, looking at the meager few blocks of wood.

Anna smiles mischievously. “The wood is alchemically induced to burn for a few days. If I’m smart about burning it when I’m here, it really does last me a long time.”

Dean’s fists turn white from how hard he’s pressing them to his knees. Before a proper introduction, Dean stands up, and stares down at them. “Excuse me for a while,” he says through his teeth. “I will join you in a minute.”

He disappears through the glass door, leaving Anna and Castiel confused. It hurts a little to watch Dean go, his dark coat has snow on it. It’s beautiful, but eerie.

“What’s gotten into him?” She asks, the color of her cheeks returning. “Is he always like this?”

“I confess, I don’t usually understand him,” Castiel says. He’s not lying about this. It’s very hard to understand what Dean wants from him, especially after their hand-holding party. Crap, he’s thinking about it again.

Anna places a hand on his, and fills it with warmth. The pain of Castiel’s muscles goes away, leaving him relaxed. He loves Anna with all of his heart, and he wants to help her. Seeing her like this makes his heart ache, always. She holds his hand, her bright eyes worried.

“I wanted to get to know him,” Anna says. “Do you think he’s going to come back?”
Castiel just shrugs. “Maybe he was nervous about talking to a Goddess.”

Anna punches his shoulder lightly. Her own fingers look black, but the gangrene is gradually receding. It’s taking a lot out of her to heal herself, and Michael. Michael has grown used to treating his own body like a temple. Even a pinprick requires Anna’s magic. She’s nothing to him. It hurts Castiel more than Dean leaving. After an hour of them talking, they forget about Dean and his abrupt exit. Castiel really likes coming here, and wishes he could take Anna down to the Dungeons, where it’s warm, and the Dragossi could show her affection, and play with her.

After a little while they hear a knock, and Anna turns around to see Dean carrying big pieces of wood in his hands, along with some other tools. Castiel jumps from his seat to help Dean get inside. Dean looks extremely tired, his cheeks are red, and he’s breathing heavily. His knuckles and fingers are bleeding from the wood. He probably didn’t even rest.

“Fuck this,” Dean says, not hiding his own Jarsakian accent. “I won’t let you freeze to death every night just because someone thinks they own your pain.”

Before Anna can protest, Dean drops the wood, and starts working on the window.

“Evia!” Castiel says. “Michael will kill her. And you. What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Dean simply starts hammering the first wood panel on top of the window, risking his own life. If he moves just right, he’d fall to his death. Down the Keep Giant. Down the outstretched hands. “The King won’t kill me,” he says. “Or you. You said yourself, these walls have eyes, so let him see me doing this.”

“Evia…” Anna pleads.

“No,” Dean stops, and looks at her, his eyes filled with sorrow. “You deserve respect. You deserve warmth.”

And so he goes. Castiel’s heart threatens to beat out of his chest, but he doesn’t stop Dean. Nor does Anna. They both know that Dean’s right. Michael won’t kill him. Michael’s head over heels for him, and whatever he does looks like Dean’s doing it for Michael. Even this. Even his harsh words will make Michael yearn for Dean more.

Castiel yearns for him, too.

Dean is great with fixing things. So he fixes the window. The wind and snow stops, there’s no more cold coming in through the window, and no sunlight, except for the alchemical orbs on Anna’s ceiling, and the hearth, which is now warmer than ever. As Dean hammers the last board into the stone, with the alchemical steel nails that go can go through stone, and a little bit of magic he borrowed from Samandriel’s stash, the window is boarded up.

He takes his coat off, the one with the fancy embroidery he bought from the shops down in Patheo. He hands it to Anna, and says. “You will never be cold. I will fight for you, and he will never be able to take this away from you again.” And then, he looks at Castiel, pointing a finger at him, “And you. You should have done this earlier.”

The anger is unexpected. It sends a shiver down Castiel’s back, Castiel’s fingers freeze on the hem of Castiel’s shirt, clutching at the fabric. He knows he should’ve tried harder, but when Dean says it, Castiel feels like shit.

Dean understands he has hurt Castiel the second he sees it on Castiel’s face, then he walks over, hugging both of them. Anna instantly snuggles into Dean’s warmth, but Castiel stays still.
He whispers, “I won’t let him punish you.”

They all stay with Anna for a while, then. Dean asks Anna about her books, and like always, he shines brighter than the sun. Castiel, with an aching heart, doesn’t stop himself absorbing Dean’s light. The room is so warm, Castiel sheds his cloak, and takes off his boots. Remembering the night Castiel first held Dean’s hand, Castiel thinks about Dean’s offer. With so much warmth Dean gives out, Castiel would love to know what it would be like to have that warmth from Dean’s hands. What it would be like to just lay there in bed with him, fingers locked together, face to face.

Anna likes Dean as much as he does her. Castiel understands that being jealous is stupid, but here he is, jealous of Dean’s undivided attention. Anna talks about all of the books she’s read, and Dean repeats some of their names to commit them to memory. He promises to visit whenever he can.

Only later, when they’re in the Dungeons, Dean takes Castiel’s hand in his, and breathes a nervous ‘sorry’ out.

“I said that purely because of Michael. If he heard it, then he’s thinking I’m fighting with you. He keeps talking about you as if you’re of lower status than me. Whether he heard or saw us, I’d like you both to be safe. If that makes sense. I’m so so so sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. You’re the most caring person I have ever known.”

Castiel understands. So he lets Dean hold his hand. He lets them both stand in the middle of the Curtain hall, holding each other. When Castiel pulls away, he drags Dean with him to the small library. Hands him the hand-written journals with all of the information he has on the Red Ruby.

“He’s going to be harder on you from now on,” he says, determinedly. “Learn everything you can about her. Raise her to be a fighter. And I will help you be a fighter. Tomorrow, we’re going to train twice as hard.”

They go to the gem room. A blanket on the ground, some food in a basket, and they’re sitting together, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the sparkling heap of treasure. They talk until morning again, sharing their own fears, happiness, and secrets. Castiel has never had a connection like this. When Dean listens, he remembers every detail without fail. The gems reflect on Dean’s face. Castiel notices small freckles on Dean’s face, an endearing feature he instantly falls for.

In the early morning, when all of the Dragossi are rising, Dean sighs, and says, “I’ve been having...dreams.”

“I think all of us dream, Dean.”

“No, no,” Dean hurries. “This dream, man... I don’t know how to explain it. I’ve been having it for a few years now, and it’s always the same. I’m drowning in a lake, with no way to go up, and there’s a woman with blonde hair trying so hard to tell me how to swim up. I try, and I try, until everything calms down. There’s wild Dragossi floating around me, but they never attack. I always, always, wake up when I look down and see stones covered in corals. I have never seen corals in my life, but they’re so real. It feels as if I can touch them with my own hands, and they won’t crumble. I guess what I’m trying to say is that it doesn’t feel like a dream anymore.”

Castiel thinks about it for a short while. “You did drown, though,” he says. “When I first met you. I had to drag you out of the water.”

He remembers seeing the stone beneath their feet. And a thousand glinting eyes coming from every direction. It’s eerily similar to the dream.
“And I swear I saw blonde hair before you pulled me out,” Dean says. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s just my imagination.”

“Maybe,” Castiel says. “Or maybe you didn’t imagine anything.”

“So what does it mean?”

“I don’t know either. But Charlie might have some books on dreams, we could ask her. I’ve also been curious about the lake back in the forest. There are a few lakes that never freeze, even in winter, but the one we encountered had been warm.”

“I think it’s the wild Dragossi’s fault,” Dean says, emphasizing it with a shake of his hand in front of himself. “Have you ever met any?”

“I have, a few times. But I tend to avoid them. I specialize in domesticated Dragossi for a reason.”

“What’s your reasoning? They’re practically harmless.”

“Harmless?”

Dean stares at him, dumbfounded. “Yeah. Man, you just gotta give them some meat, and they’ll fuck right off. They don’t really like being pampered, or pet, and they sure as hell don’t like communicating with us two-legged creatures. But they’re harmless if you ain’t harmful. I like them. They’re pretty smart.”

“Entire caravans full of people have been eaten by wild Dragossi. The people who cross the forest without no supervision and no knowledge die because of them. I wouldn’t call them harmless.”

“That’s because no one is brave enough to know how wild Dragossi work.”

“And you are?”

Dean levels him with a look. “I was a Rathi village kid,” he says. “The amount of times I had to go into the forest to get illegal shit for Crowley is insane. I carried a ton of meat with me, and my buddies didn’t attack me.”

Castiel huffs out a laugh. “I cannot believe you called wild Dragossi your buddies.”

Dean nudges Castiel with his shoulder. “What if I called you buddy?”

“No thank you,” Castiel answers. He feels light again. “I’m okay with Cas.”

“Cas,” Dean repeats. “I was afraid you wouldn’t like me shortening your name. Sammy hates it.”

Castiel hugs his knees to himself, resting his chin on his knees. “I don’t hate it.”

“Okay,” Dean says, smiling at the ground.

They talk for a while more, before Dean excuses himself and goes back to his room to sleep. Castiel simply stays, feeling Dean’s warmth long after he’s gone.

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Dean reads before bed, after bed, and sometimes at breakfast, when he visits Benny and his Kitchens. Benny has no time for books, or chatting in the early mornings in the Keep. The gash on his face is healing up nicely, after Dean brought some ingredients for Benny to make his famous healing salve. Dean wanted to apologize to him, but Benny just sat him down, gave him food, and said, “Don’t you worry, brother. I’ve had worse.”

Dean has some time before his usual training routine with Castiel, so he reads to the busy Kitchen crowd out loud. They’re already halfway through the book, solely because Benny enjoys listening to Dean read and asks him to entertain the cooks during the morning rush. Claws listens on the other side of the bond, and Dean knows she’s safe.

His morning is already amazing, but when he enters the Dungeons, he finds Castiel holding two swords. Not one, but two. Everything wraps up into a one big gift, because when Dean meets Castiel’s eyes, Dean finds himself more excited about spending time with Castiel, than the gods-damned swords.

Dean rubs his hands together, smiling widely. “You changed your mind about swords? Did I knock you out in my sleep?”

Castiel simply rolls his eyes. “You’re a quick learner, and it’s not fair of me to stop you from learning two or three things at the same time. You’re capable, and I’m a bad teacher.”

Dean grins mischievously. “Samandriel told you to give me a fucking sword, didn’t he?”

“He didn’t,” Castiel answers, scandalized. His face shows a different story. There’s a blush creeping up his cheeks. “He...merely suggested.”

Coming over to Castiel, Dean grabs one of the swords in an act of showing off, but the sword swiftly falls from his hands. Dean struggles for a second, going after it, and Castiel forgets all about his embarrassment. Dean straights once he has the sword in his hands, fingers clasped tightly around the grip. It’s surprisingly lightweight, the metal is shiny enough so that Dean can see his own face staring back at him. Dean’s cheeks are fuller, his skin is healthy, almost shining. He breathes in, feeling his own muscles move with an ease that wasn’t there before.

Castiel only watches him, silent.

“Michael keeps talking about how Jarsakian food is making me healthier,” Dean says, voice suddenly a little strained. The excitement he felt earlier is submerged underneath the mix of anxiety and self-loathing whenever Michael even mentions his appearance. “He’s not wrong, I guess.”

Castiel’s comforting hand appears again, fits so nicely on Dean’s shoulder. His hand is warm, and it doesn’t feel like a cage when he touches Dean. “You do look healthier than when you first came here. As does Sam. A regular diet will do that to you.”

“I know,” Dean says, closing his eyes against the sensation of Castiel’s grip. “I’m having trouble understanding why I feel like I’m suffocating when he says it, and absolutely normal when you say it.”

“We’re friends,” Castiel says. Dean likes the way it sounds, but his heart screams for something more than the word friend. “Whereas Michael is far from it. I think you might be feeling overwhelmed because he is overstepping your boundaries.”

“He’s not even overstepping them,” Dean says, testing the weight of the sword in his hand. “After the Brothel, I have no problem with people touching me, or sitting close to me. But even if he’s
sitting a few feet away from me, I want to shrink in my seat and never look into his eyes. He feels wrong.”

“Michael is poison,” Castiel says, with no remorse or pity. “Because of him, Jarsaki is suffering famine, early deaths, illnesses, and we’re on the brink of war with three countries. I wake up every Friday thinking of ways of getting you out of this mess, and I am so sorry I dragged you into dealing with him on a regular basis. You do not deserve to feel hopeless, or unsettled. I’m so sorry.”

Dean places his own hand on Castiel’s, and turns his cheek to rest on both of their hands clasped together. He wants to tell Castiel the only thing keeping him from going insane when he’s sitting with Michael is that he knows Castiel is waiting in the Dungeons.

The overwhelming need to have Castiel’s arms around him gets the best of Dean. Castiel seems to accept Dean’s obvious intentions, because he beckons Dean closer. Dean fits himself in between Castiel’s waiting arms, and drops the sword down. The Dragossi barely blink an eye at two men sharing an intimate moment.

Castiel smells like home. His warmth seeps through Dean’s bones, making him feel safe, guarded. Dean has spent all of his life protecting, and for the first time in his life, he feels like he’s the one being protected. It’s nice.

Perhaps, it’s nice because it’s Castiel.

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Castiel comes back from his weekly meeting with Michael and his posse. Michael never keeps him for more than 10 minutes, so Castiel lists all of the purchases he has to make to keep Michael’s Dragossi well. Michael looks as bored and angry as ever. When Castiel comes back to the Dungeon, the first thought that comes to mind is Dean.

He wanders around, until he finds Dean sitting on the ground next to the Dungeon lake, playing with a few smaller Dragossi. Castiel sees Claws flying around Dean’s head, puffing smoke out through her nostrils. The smaller Dragossi can’t seem to find their footing, Claws is much faster than them, but they do try to keep up. Claws grows fast, but she still doesn’t like leaving Dean for longer than a day, as a hatchling would. Dean looks like he has finished all of his chores early, his arms are still a bit dirty from cleaning up.

Castiel thinks about inviting him to the baths, but once he realizes what would ensue, Claws pushes her nose into Dean’s side, making him turn around and see Castiel standing there. He’s holding a book, and his linen shirt hitches up, showing some of those dark markings Castiel would really like to see one day. Maybe the baths would be a good idea, after all-

“Would you like to learn how to make alchemical orbs?” Castiel blurts out before Dean can comment on his cheeks.

“You mean like the ones you used on me and Claws when we first met?” he asks, amused.

Claws flies over to Cas, perching on top of his head, playfully nudging his nose with hers. Castiel laughs, nervously. “I don’t make the cage orbs myself, Samandriel is better at them. I can show you a few I’ve learned to make. Nothing really difficult.”
“This ain’t really Dragossi Master Apprentice work,” Dean says, smirking.

“I thought it could be useful in the future,” Castiel says, scratching the back of his neck. He feels painfully obvious, as if Dean can see right through his bullshit.

“If you want to hang out, you can just tell me,” Dean says, getting up. Claws lets out an approving peep. Her smart red eyes bear into Castiel’s.

Fuck, he does see through Castiel’s bullshit.

“Well,” Castiel says, avoiding Dean’s eyes. “Maybe I do.”

“Just a maybe, Cas?”

“Please stop patronizing me,” Castiel says, the blush growing stronger. “Let me do this my way.”

Dean holds up his hands in defense, pursing his lips. “Okay! We can go make some orbs. Learn some alchemy. I’m down.”

“Alright,” Castiel says, slowly nodding. He doesn’t understand why the hell is it so hard for him to admit that he really wants to spend more time with Dean outside of their usual regime. Their night out was the most wonderful thing he has ever experienced, but it doesn’t feel like it’s enough. There’s never enough of Dean. “Let’s go, I have some supplies in the Red Curtain room.”

“Can Claws come?”

“Yes,” Castiel says. “If she promises to not burn any of my notes.”

“That was one time,” Dean says, with Claws flying toward his open arms.

“One time too many,” Castiel retorts.

They leave the Dungeon Lake. Castiel thinks about Dean walking behind him, listening to him coo to Claws with every other step. His heart is beating so hard, there’s a lump stuck in his throat. It’s terrifying to realise there’s something there in the back of his mind, and deep in his heart, with Michael looming over all of them, and trying to get Dean into his bed, it’s dangerous to feel this way for Dean.

The Curtain Hall is empty, save for the few burning candles. Dean helps Castiel clean up the table, while Claws stares longingly at all of the paper around her. It’s warm here, so when Castiel finally places a giant bowl on top of the raggedy table, he’s sweating a little. Dean doesn’t stop staring at him with those fucking green eyes.

Castiel points at the wooden boxes stacked on top of each other in the corner. You can barely see them walking inside of the room, the boxes are hidden by a small stone niche, but once you know they’re there, it’s hard to unsee the dark wood with colorful feathers, beads, chunks of wool and fabric inside of them. “I have toys for the little Dragossi inside of several of them. Could you get me the third one from the top?”

Dean goes over there, and raises his hands to drag the box out. Castiel catches himself looking at the strip of marked skin when Dean’s linen shirt hitches up. With his throat dry, he accepts the box from Dean with shaking fingers. The box itself is heavy, with a sheer silk strip of fabric covering what’s inside.

Castiel accumulated a lot of valuable things over the years of being a Dragossi Master. While he
traveled to achieve Michael’s ridiculous requests, he shopped in shady streets, went on a few adventures to acquire some really valuable artifacts. Some of them, he hides everywhere in the Dungeon, and some, he keeps in this box. He unveils the batch, with Dean’s eyes strictly on him.

“I have a few things I would like to show you before teaching you how to make the sand wall orb,” he says, pointing at the bag of Lafallkan sand in the corner. “During my travels, I learned a lot about the art of poison, and medicine.”

“Wow, poison?” Dean says, eyes wide. “Okay, please don’t tell me you’re secretly an assassin or something.”

“I am most definitely not an assassin of any kind,” Castiel assures him. “I do, however, have the knowledge I need if I ever need to poison someone.”

“Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

Castiel’s relaxing much more now that they’re communicating as usual. “Today should suffice,” he says, in a deadpan voice. “I do recall you have a really good memory.”

Dean takes a dark velvet bag out of the box, smiling at Castiel’s comment. “Damn, it’s heavy.”

“Dragossi teeth dust,” he explains. “Used for deep sleep, sometimes for sword making. I have heard people use it as medicine for a cold, but I would not suggest ingesting more than a half-a-spoon a month.”

Then, Castiel takes a glass vial full of pink liquid. Dean gapes. “Is that what I think it is?”

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “You know about the Pink Horror?”

Dean snorts. “Who doesn’t? Granted, I think it’s just a rumor.”

Castiel smirks, tapping against the waxed cork, sealing the liquid from the outside world. “Not a joke, not a legend. Personally, I have never seen it work, but that might be a side effect of the poison.”

“Ha,” Dean says. “We can’t prove it has any effects on the person, right? It’s impossible.”

“Precisely,” Castiel says. “I have talked to the people who provided me with this specific vial. One of them knows a woman who was immune to the effect, and who was given the same drop of Pink Horror at the same time. As it started working, her friend slowly drifted from her sight, screaming at everyone in the area, but it was as if people forgot who she was instantly. The second the friend had it on her tongue, even her guards couldn’t remember why they were there. The Immune Woman lived to tell the tale. There are documents specifically created for a punishment like this. I have read a few after I got the vial. It was really disturbing. I have a page from the official leather book from their Archives, but I swear to Gods, I don’t remember anything on it.”

“Can I see it?”

“Yes,” Castiel says, and digs out a piece of parchment, with a list written in red. Dean looks at it, reading every word slowly, and out loud. He sees the words, understands the words, but when he lifts his eyes from the paper, for the life of him he can’t remember the name of the person on the paper. He reads it again, and instantly forgets. It’s unsettling.

“So it’s true? Once you drink it, everyone forgets who you are, and they can’t see you?” Dean asks. He re-reads the parchment. Looking up, Castiel is just as confused. “Do you remember me reading
“I don’t remember giving you the parchment. And yes, it is true,” Castiel says, placing the vial and the parchment back in the box. “Nobody knows what truly happens to the person. I have read a few Archivist books who made guesses. Some say the person is still alive, doomed to walk the world until their death. Some try to explain that the person simply vanishes from existence completely.”

“I can’t imagine walking around your loved ones, knowing they forgot everything about you.”

Castiel takes a deep breath. “It’s the most terrifying thing in the world, to be forgotten.”

“Why are you showing me this?” Dean asks.

Castiel pauses. “I think you know why.”

Castiel wishes he could fool Michael into drinking the vial. He wishes he didn’t have thoughts like this, these vile, horrible thoughts. He wouldn’t wish an end like this on anyone, but here he is, thinking he would like to forget everything about Michael. Dean nods, staring at the small vial of pure death. “You should hide it better.”

“There’s no need,” Castiel says. “It can only be opened by the one who bought it, with a secret word to make the wax melt.”

“You?”

“Yes,” Castiel answers. “I do not know anything about alchemical wax, only that it’s very hard to make, and very hard to break. No living heat can melt it, only the power of a word whispered.”

“That sounds kinda romantic.”

“I am a romantic,” Castiel says, with his heart skipping a beat. “Which is why I bought the damn vial. Solely because I could woo my future significant other.”

Castiel almost misses Dean’s sharp intake of breath, so minimal, it almost looks like it didn’t happen. “Your way of courtship is fucking weird, dude.”

“So I have been told,” Castiel says, then swiftly changes the subject. “With this, I actually wanted to show you the power of alchemy. You can make something indestructible with the right kind of ingredients, and you can make something powerful with a flip of a hand. Making sand-wall orbs is easy, but it does require a lot of precision, and strong hands.”

“I’ve got strong hands.”

“And I’ve got precision,” Castiel says, smiling at Dean. “Get the Lafallkan sand. I’m going to show you the basics.”

***

The next Friday turns out to be a complete nightmare. Dean is late to meet Michael by two minutes, and when he runs through the door, Michael’s sour face is more than enough to make Dean squirm. Once he takes his usual seat and takes a drink of the mead, Michael starts talking.
“You’re late,” he says.

Dean pretends it’s nothing. He pretends his fingers and legs don’t shake sitting here. Dean knows he’s not afraid of Michael. He’s more scared of what Michael could do to his friends if Dean didn’t obey.

“I’m deeply sorry,” Dean says hurriedly. “I had to help feed the newly born hatchlings, Gods they are more fussy than the teenagers.”

Michael nods, pursing his lips and drinking some mead from his own encrusted chalice. His fingers sparkle from how many rings there are. “I really don’t like waiting.”

Dean feels like Michael doesn’t like waiting for a lot of things, because when he stands up and drags his chair next to Dean’s, Dean takes a sharp breath through his nose, his muscles tense. Michael takes it as an invitation to touch Dean’s hand.

Claws, who is more than worried about what’s happening, starts growling in Dean’s head. With rising panic, Dean tries to find a way to save her from images like this, to save her from his discomfort. It’s hard to even think when she’s so aggressive toward Michael’s touch. Dean involuntarily flinches away.

Michael looks angered, and not hurt. Which is even worse. So Dean simply catches Michael’s hands in between his own and promptly wills his mind to build up a wall between him and Claws for a second.

“My King,” Dean says with a shaking voice. “Us Salitians are not used to abrupt courting. I am ashamed to say this out loud, but I feel the need to make things clear as to how this should progress -”

Michael lifts one of Dean’s fingers to his mouth, and kisses it, sloppy. It’s mildly disgusting, but Dean makes himself stay dead still. The inside of his head feels like mush, with the wall helping him and destroying him from inside. With no one to turn to and scream, Dean feels trapped in his own head with Michael’s unwanted attention in front of him.

“I do not like waiting, at all,” Michael says. “But you see, how curious of me to reach for a man so unreachable. I am not used to rejection, Master Evia.”

Dean wills himself to hiss through closed teeth, making it look like as if Dean’s trying to keep himself from jumping on Michael. Dean’s always been a great actor, and even though he feels like he wants to vomit, he says, “I am not rejecting you. I am simply saying that Salitian courting is very different from Jarsakian-”

Michael interrupts, “You’re unbearable. I thirst for you, and your body, I wish to see you on your knees for me. Gods, you’re absolutely delicious, and yet you’re so far away. You have to understand how hard it is for me to be in constant agony when you’re sitting right in front of me like a present.”

Dean’s nausea goes even further when he looks into Michael’s eyes, the cold, endless abyss of nothing but selfish wishes and horrible thoughts. He says. “Please wait a little longer,” Dean says, the words stuck in his throat. “I wish nothing else than to be of service to you.”

Michael smells Dean’s hand and exhales, slowly, in pure bliss. He’s terrifying. “That’s what I like hearing. I will wait. Not for long, but I will.”

After their dinner, with Michael’s hand constantly on Dean’s thigh, Dean practically runs back to the Dungeon, scrubbing at his own skin. He runs past Castiel, and straight to Claws, removing the wall
between them as he crashes inside. Claws, who is more worried than angry, cuddles to him instantly, replaying her worry over and over again in his head. The line vibrates with such intensity, Dean lets out tears of anger himself, as his breath catches in his lungs. It’s hard to take in some air, and it’s hard to exhale. He’s shaking pretty badly, and doesn’t even feel it when someone puts a wool blanket on him, and hugs him close. Claws sends encouragement and safety through the bond, and Dean instantly recognizes Castiel’s touch. He welcomes the safety, welcomes Castiel’s silent help, and doesn’t talk until it’s time for him to sleep. He sleeps with Claws that night, and Castiel never leaves his side, guarding him against the world.
Funny Little Feelings

Castiel enters the Dungeon through the red curtain, he sees Dean, perched behind the table, hands halfway down inside of a bowl full of Lafallkan sand, kneading with such force his forehead is dripping with sweat. Dean’s brilliant green eyes go up the second Castiel clears his throat, the excited sparkle directed at him, and no one else. Castiel’s heart does a tiny flutter that scares him shitless, but also gives him all the more reason to stare at Dean unabashedly.

“How long have you been doing this?” Castiel asks, moving in front of the table. The piles of paper and parchment he left yesterday are neatly stacked in the correct order, with quills and pencils put in their respective boxes. It’s crazy clean inside of the entrance of the Dungeon, which Castiel doesn’t see very often. Dean, however, looks like he’s in need of a long, long bath.

Dean hums, pursing his lips. His hands never stop moving. “Two hours, give or take. It’s still not the right consistency.”

“Which is?” Castiel tests him, as always.

“Has to look like there ain’t no holes in it. Like dough, but more sandy.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way, but you’re correct. Dough-like consistency, or wet sand, would be a better explanation.”

Dean snorts, and ducks his hand to wipe off the sweat from underneath his eyes with the fabric on his shoulder. “Whatever you say, boss,” he says, amused. “It’s just fucking sand dough, is what you mean.”

Dean has filled out throughout the few months they’ve been training. Since there’s not a lot to do while they wait for Dragossi breeding season, Dean spends most of his time reading books about alchemy, and about all of the different ways he can make orbs. It’s Dean’s third attempt to make the sand wall one, which Castiel uses for the waterfall.

There’s a low growl from the end of the corridor that leads to the nests, and Castiel raises an eyebrow. Dean just blinks. “She needed some air.”

“It’s really unsafe to leave her alone at her age.”

“She’s a fucking baby,” Dean says, still kneading the sand. “I’ll call her if she wanders off too far away.”

“What if she flies through the waterfall?”

“Nah. She won’t. She’s more interested in the small spaces she can still fit through.”

Castiel thinks about the corridors, how small they are for a typical teenaged Dragossi. Claws is still too young to be called a teenager, she has a few months to go, but the overachiever sentiment she shares with Dean is clearly evident in her development. Castiel can’t figure out whether he thinks it’s
good for her, or if Dean’s a bad influence. Too much freedom might cause damage.

Claws is bigger than the both of them, now. Her body fits through the corridors, but soon, she will have to move into a nest closer to the other Dragossi, purely because of how fast she’s growing. Dean’s been running around with her next to the waterfall. Dean in circles on the ground, and Claws in the air, training her wings for flight outside of the Keep.

Dean’s concentrated on making the sand stop clutching to his fingers, which is a nuisance, as Castiel remembers. The first time he had to make an alchemical orb, he finally understood why Lafallkan men would never approach any of the beaches on their island. If you had to clean this off after a swim in the crystal clear ocean, you’d never want to enter the dark sands again.

Claws seems to wander off. Castiel’s slightly worried, but Dean’s face isn’t clouded with concern. He looks like he’s enjoying the challenge.

He’s noticing a change in Dean, whenever he comes back from Michael. Throughout these few months, Dean has come back either angry, or disappointed, or with an ashy expression. Every time he returns, immediately he goes to see Claws, and doesn’t emerge for an hour or two. Sometimes, he avoids coming to the Dungeons at all. Sure, Castiel gets the rundown of their conversation sometimes, but he doesn’t want to pressure Dean into talking about Michael at all.

They’ve shared conversations like the one in the middle of sword training. Castiel likes them as much as just listening to Dean talk about funny Brothel stories, or recaps of what he’s been reading with Sam. Which reminds him of Sam’s eternal interest in the creatures of the forest.

“Did Charlie find the Laume legends yet?”

Dean thinks about it for a second, the kneading just as intense as before. His concentration never falters. “Haven’t asked.”

“Would you mind telling her I cannot join you today? I have a few errands to run.”

“Sure, man,” Dean says. Castiel swears he’s seeing a tone of pink pass over Dean’s cheeks. “I’m gonna go after I put Claws to bed.”

Castiel nearly snorts, but refrains from it. “Do you sing lullabies?”

Dean stares at him. “You saying I don’t have a good voice?”

“No,” Castiel says, reassuring him. “No. I haven’t ever heard you sing.”

“Claws loves it,” Dean explains. He’s almost done with the sand kneading. What follows, is a light dusting of some bone dust, with the making of glass. Which would take all day if Dean decides to make it until nightfall. Just enough time for Castiel to go to town and see Pleasure. “You want me to sing for you, tuck you into bed?”

Castiel is surprised to catch himself thinking about Dean’s fingers clutching the fabric of his black covers, then his hands on overheated skin, Dean’s breath on his neck-

Fuck. What?

“How could I refuse an offer like this?” Castiel says, a small, nervous smile tugging at his lips. He hopes Dean hasn’t noticed the change in Castiel’s demeanor. “Are you going to finish the orbs today?”
“Yep,” Dean says. His hands are covered in dark sand. Castiel wishes he could feel the same sand in between his fingers, wrapped around Dean’s. “Samandriel’s gonna help me with the glass.”

“We should have some of the orbs in storage.”

“I know.”

“Do you need anything from the market?”

“Nah - unless. If you find those pastries Sam likes, the uh-”

“The Sea Fruit ones?”

“Those. I’ll give you the rings back.”

Castiel shakes his head. “No need. I’d like to spoil Sam today.”

Dean’s grin widens, the sneaky glint of his eyes turning even more amused. “What about me, then? No pampering or anything?”

Castiel’s not used to flirting. His past lovers have announced their intentions before any of romantic communication even happened, which was always easy to deal. But Dean’s easy going smile, the swirl of words with a hint of a playful mood gets to him, so Castiel says, “Depends if you’re going to behave.”

Dean doesn’t seem fazed by Castiel responding in the same manner. Which makes Castiel’s heart beat faster, a little bit. “I behave all the time.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Castiel says, smiling with his mouth closed.

“So what do I have to do if I want to get spoiled by the Dragossi Whisperer?” Dean’s voice is getting raspier.

Castiel’s about to answer something he hasn’t even considered ever saying out loud to anyone ever, when Samandriel enters through the same red curtain, holding a few orbs. One of them is broken.

“How much did you make?” He asks Dean, who looks sort of flustered from the interaction.

Castiel’s pissed that Samandriel’s here, for some reason.

Dean only shrugs. “More than you can fit in those.”

Samandriel stops behind the table, and places the orbs one by one. “We’re going to have to make more. We’ll need Claws’ help, too.”

Dean opens his mouth, then closes it. “Will her fire be strong enough?”

Samandriel nods. “She’s the strongest Dragossi to walk Seratonia. Her fire will make glass quicker than any other fire. Not even alchemical.”

Dean smiles, clearly listening to whatever’s happening with the bond. “She’s proud of her lungs.”

“I would be too,” Castiel adds, softly. Their eyes meet, and Castiel wants nothing more than to just stay here and talk to Dean all day. But he can’t. He’s got to meet Pleasure.

Dean licks his lips, then shakes everything off, directing his attention to the sand. “See you later, Cas. Don’t stay up late.”
“You’re not my mother,” Castiel jokes, while walking out.

“I’m your gods-damned nightmare,” Dean shouts after him. Castiel laughs, amused all the way to the tavern on the outskirts of Patheo.

***

Pleasure waits for him in the tavern, as before, eating some chocolate covered figs out of a red waxed-linen bag. The tavern boys ignore him, just as everyone else in this gods-damned world ignores him when Pleasure wants it. The tavern itself is in the low part of Patheo, where the food and drink are cheap, and no one wants to get robbed. Castiel doesn’t much care, and apparently, neither does Pleasure.

Castiel doesn’t even wait, places the bag of rings in front of him, and says, “The Lost Boy. What have you heard about him?”

Pleasure eyes the bag, and grabs it off the table. His fingers are covered in chocolate, it stains the bag as Pleasure pockets it somewhere in his flowy, translucent dress. His skin looks even ashier, a sort of greenish color underneath the bad alchemical lights.

“The Lost Boy,” Pleasure hums. Castiel sits down, and without ordering, gets a cup of dark ale placed in front of him. He decides not to touch it yet. “I have heard a lot. Surely you know the legend.”

“I heard a few versions of it. One, where the Lost Boy climbs up the Keep and restores the Kingdom of Jarsaki. Another, where the Lost Boy finds a lost relic of the past, and becomes the True King.”

“The popular versions, you mean.”

“They’re just stories,” Castiel says. “I’d like to know when exactly did the story start floating around.”

Pleasure’s smile is devilish, his teeth are white. Something sparks in his eyes, and Castiel isn’t sure if he made the right decision to meet Pleasure. “You’re asking the right questions, Prince! I’m surprised you’re starting to figure it all out.”

“Do you want more rings? I can give you m-”

“-no need,” Pleasure interrupts. “I’ll tell you. After I get some wine.”

He orders a bottle of the best wine in the tavern, and suddenly, everyone can see him. People are greeting Pleasure, some of them stare at him as if he’s the most beautiful person in this world, and some seem like they’d like to come and talk to Pleasure, tell him their biggest, darkest secrets. But once the wine comes, everyone starts ignoring him again.

“The Lost Boy and the True King are the same person, which one of the popular versions has guessed right. I have been around the time the story came to be, and I have witnessed myself the Lost Boy become, as you say, Lost. Your brother is the culprit. If it weren’t for him, the story wouldn’t have gotten out of hand.”

Castiel breathes in, then out. “Do you mean the Winchester boy?”
“He’s lost, isn’t he?” Pleasure says, drinking the wine from a fancy glass. “See the general public doesn’t know this little fact. The whole ordeal is cloudy. The Winchesters had a child, but no one has seen it. The boy had no official name. There are no surviving scripts or parchments with the name of the boy, but here we are, with various versions of the Lost Boy, and no one to prove who he is. Funny, people create wild stories just to imagine there’s a way escaping King Michael.”

Castiel searches for more words, but nothing comes out. The marks on Dean’s skin, his green eyes, his uncanny ability to make friends with every single person he meets is ridiculously close to how Mary and John were when he first met them. It’s scary. It’s fucking horrifying, so when Castiel meets Pleasure’s eyes, he says, “You know him.”

Pleasure stays silent. Castiel doesn’t have any more rings, so Pleasure is of no use to him anymore.

Castiel finishes the drink, and stands up to go, when he hears Pleasure say, “Yes. And he’s going to get Michael off his throne.”

When Castiel’s heart almost stops, Pleasure stands up as well. Nobody cares he’s here, and he grabs the wine bottle with him.

“Do I know him?” Castiel asks, fingers shaking.

Pleasure leaves without answering, his shimmering dress flowing on his moving hips. Castiel stands there for a while, contemplating the information he has received.

***

Spring turns into Summer, and it’s almost unbearable to live inside of the Dungeon. Castiel walks around with short sleeves, sometimes even forgoes getting his shirt on. The Dragossi are happy, though. Their scales miss the heat every year, and some of them are excited for some swimming in the Dungeon lake.

Dean is getting better at fighting with a sword. In the morning, Castiel lets him choose whichever training session he’d like, and Dean almost always ends up choosing sword practice. The blade in his hand feels natural, and Castiel’s seeing his progress with every hit. Dean doesn’t waste any time, learns how to move with grace, his attention to detail is incredible. Dean’s weekly meetings with Michael remain the same, so when he comes back from one today, Castiel is already waiting with a bottle of mead and some sweets he brought back from Patheo’s shops.

“How did it go?”

Dean just grunts, grabbing his usual cup, full of the strongest mead Castiel can find in the Dungeons. “I despise everything he stands for,” he admits.

“I’m sorry you have to go through it.”

Dean pauses, grabbing a small pastry, and stuffing his face out of frustration. “He told me he’s planning to go see the land of Zhwai next season. He wants me to go with him.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him that I won’t be leaving you alone with the Dragossi, and he reluctantly agreed with me.
So, bad news - he’s going to talk with the King of Zhwai. Good news - he’s going to be gone for a month.”

“We can take all of the Dragossi out for a fly, then,” Castiel says, excited. “They’re not allowed to leave when Michael is here.”

“Ooooh, Claws can fly around too! She’s tired of always being here, I think she’s old enough to get some free time up in the air.”

Claws is half the size of Dean, now. When Castiel deems her old enough to join the other Dragossi for some socializing, Dean acts like a mother hen, protective and territorial. He helps prepare a new sleeping nest for Claws next to the other Dragossi her age, and when Dean shows it to her, she walks around in circles, brushes the twigs and rubies around with her snout, letting out approving noises. Dean tells Castiel that she’s excited to meet new Dragossi, because she’s getting tired of only Samandriel.

Their talk continues for a while, before Dean, as always goes to bed alone. Castiel remembers the last time Dean invited him to sleep with him, and his heart aches for the closeness he could’ve had that one time. But Dean leaves, and Castiel doesn’t want to go back to his own room. He wishes, silently, that he could knock on Dean’s door, and be enveloped in his warmth.

Dean is overjoyed when Castiel decides to join him and Charlie, and Sam at their weekly reading session. Charlie, who never gets tired of reading out loud, reads sections of a book they’ve chosen for that month, so naturally, they stuff their faces with food Dean got from Benny.

Castiel sits next to him, the heat of his body a pleasant thought, so Dean doesn’t give a single fuck if he looks glued to Castiel’s side. None of them say anything, which lets Dean enjoy the moment. Castiel doesn’t move away either.

Charlie, with her face covered in exploding stars and darkness, opens up the book of legends Sam found lying in a pile of forgotten fairy-tales. She starts reading, with an ominous voice.

“There once was a girl, who had a wonderful father and a wonderful mother. The mother, who had been the sun in both of their lives, suddenly passed away, after a sickness that threatened every living being in this world. Before her death, the fair-haired girl wept at her mother’s bedside, and the mother told her she loved her very much.

Not long after, the father found a step-mother, a wicked woman, who had two daughters of her own. The daughters were lazy, well-kept, and picked on the girl, calling her a poor thing. Unfortunately, the father caught the same disease, and wanted to leave everything to his true daughter.

But the stepmother did not care about her husband’s dying wish. After the funeral, the girl became a slave to her stepmother, and her daughters. One night, the daughters thought of killing the girl, as she was a nuisance to their family.

They left golden thread inside of the baths, as well as drinks and food for the Laume, who were known to use the baths after the family had used them. They bathed with the step-mother, and told the girl to go and bathe alone, after midnight.

The girl couldn’t do anything else, but listen to her horrible step-sisters, so she went.

Once she was inside of the baths, washing herself, a few golden haired women and men entered the baths, laughing. They were beautiful, every single one of them, with faces like Gods. Once they noticed the poor girl, they immediately asked her to come dance with them, and learn the trade.
The girl looked down, and said, ‘But how will I dance, if I don’t have a brush to brush my hair? I can’t dance with my hair unbrushed.’

The Laume looked at each other, and one went away, to find the most beautiful brush they owned. Once the girl had the brush, made of silver and iron, with bristles of hardened silk, she brushed her hair. Once she was done, the Laume asked her to dance with them again.

The girl pouted. ‘But I don’t have a dark shirt to dance with. How am I going to dance, when I don’t have any good clothes? I cannot dance with my old, ratty linen.’

The Laume searched for the shirt, and came back within an hour, with the most beautiful sheer blouse, with golden embroidery, and rubies sewn into the fabric.

The girl put it on, and got the question again.

Her answer was, ‘What about a skirt? I don’t own one.’

The Laume ran, got her the skirt, the most beautiful skirt the girl has ever owned in her life, with flowing rainbows between the fabrics.

‘What about shoes?’

“And gloves?’

“Oh, I don’t have any earrings.’

‘What about rings?’

“A coat? It’s cold outside!’

She asked, and asked, and asked. And before the first light hit the baths, the girl stood there dressed like a Queen, with all the Laume around her.

‘Well,’ one of the Laume asked angrily. ‘Will you dance with us now?’

There was no time, though. Once the sunlight hit the windows, Laume screamed, and scattered out of the baths, leaving the girl alone.

The girl went back into the house, alive and well. The stepmother and step-sisters were livid. When the girl told them what she had done, the stepmother wanted all of this for her daughters, as well. So she told them what to do, and so the step-sisters went into the baths after midnight.

The Laume appeared, hoping for a dance from the girl. They were surprised to see the sisters.

‘Care for a dance?’ asked one of the Laume men, their golden hair flowing as if there was a breeze.

The step-sisters, eager to get all of the goodies the girl had gotten, started listing every single thing they had wanted. Shoes, skirts, blouses, brushes, oils. The Laume got everything in an hour, and the step-sisters, dressed beautifully, went to dance with the Laume.

They danced, and danced, and danced, all night. The first step-sister wanted a drink, but nobody let her stop dancing. They ripped her throat for asking to rest. The second step-sister lost her consciousness after a few hours of non-stop dancing, and the Laume took turns biting into her flesh for a refreshment.

The stepmother found their bodies in the morning, their blood in the baths, but all of the things the
step-sisters have asked for were carefully placed next to their lifeless bodies. The stepmother died from grief.

The girl, however, lived to see a brighter future, and married a Prince.”

“That’s gruesome,” is Sam’s first comment.

Dean just says, “I loved it.”

Castiel says, “My mother used to tell me this story when I was little.”

There’s a deep sadness hidden behind his words, and Dean leans into him. “I wish I coulda met her.”

Castiel smiles, a little sadly. Even with the sadness behind his smile, Castiel sits straight, his shoulder touching Dean’s. They sit like this all the time now, shoulder to shoulder. Dean lowkey loves it. “I wish all of you did, too. She would have liked you. I’m sure she would have joined and read some stories with you.”

“You’re always welcome to join us, Castiel,” Charlie says, setting the book down. “Maybe you can read some of her favorite stories to us.”

“I’d love that,” Castiel says.

So he does, weekly, which makes Dean extremely happy. Charlie and Sam always leave those two seats for them, next to each other.

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Castiel never takes his eyes away from Dean whenever they’re fighting near the Dungeon lake. Dragossi all but ignore them, and Claws usually stays very close to Dean. She’s big, now, almost the half the size of them both, and it’s unsettling when she looks at Castiel as if she’s going to murder him if he even tries disarming Dean. They’ve been training her to fly for a while now, and Dean flat out refused to climb on her back. Castiel took her out for a few minutes, letting her roam around the Keep and refresh her scales in the sun. It’s really amazing to see her get better at everything just as Dean’s improving as well. Dean’s sword skills come naturally to him. He moves like art, his training linen hugs his biceps beautifully. Castiel finds himself staring at the lines of Dean’s body more than once, and not because he’s checking whether Dean’s fighting posture is alright. Quite the opposite.

The only time when Dean’s concentration isn’t fleeting is when they train. It’s liberating, but sometimes Castiel wishes they’d have a moment like they did the first training session they had - with Dean and him in the water, laughing their heads off. Castiel lets his feelings fuck with his head, just this once.

Dean’s covered in sweat, both hands on the grip of the sword. It’s a good look on him. So Castiel attacks, hungering for whatever Dean can give him - be it a concentrated look and furrowed brows, the passion Dean feels for fighting with a sword, or even a simple, toothy grin. Attacking feels like asking for something Castiel isn’t supposed to ask. Castiel’s sword swings down, then up, then forward, ferocious and with no real purpose, leaving Dean struggling to keep up with Castiel’s pace. Even Jarra, who is comfortably lying next to the water and happily snapping her jaws to keep Claws entertained, stops to see what’s going on.
Blade goes against blade. Castiel has trained all of his life, but Dean matches him in speed and in strength. They move in tandem, anticipating each other. The sand beneath their feet flies everywhere, some of it clings to their feet, making it harder to move without slipping. Castiel fights silently, but Dean...Dean now lets out angry sounds whenever their swords clash. There’s nothing but the waterfall falling down, creating an echo in the silence, and Dean’s frustration.

Castiel feels more of Mary in Dean than in anyone else he has met throughout the years. Dean’s softness and stubbornness shows best when he’s concentrating hard, just like now. The air is thick with tension, with the heat between them, with Castiel’s thoughts about the Lost Boy, and the man fighting with him.

The second Dean disarms Castiel in a swift turn and hit of the sword at the right time, in the right place, Castiel decides to find out. There are too many coincidences. What if he’s the one?

The silence rings in Castiel’s ears. Gradually, regular sounds of Dragossi moving around come back, with Dean breathing heavily. His palms are red, once he releases the sword, lets it fall down on the ground. Dean looks at his callouses, his glee returning in waves.

“You didn’t hold back today,” he comments, smiling. The usual demeanor of concentration is fading. “Did someone crawl up your ass and die? What’s on your mind, Cas?”

“I wanted to ask you something,” he says, as Dean takes a pitcher of water. The line of his neck distracts Castiel for a second, but still leaves his question burning.

“You don’t need permission to ask,” Dean snorts.

So Castiel does. “Did you know your parents?”

Dean freezes for a single moment, staring at the pitcher of water. He hands it to Castiel, and sighs. “I don’t remember them. At all. I remember taking care of Sam, but that’s pretty much it.”

“Were you born at the Brothel?”

“I don’t think so,” Dean says. “Most of the kids born in the Brothel have documents proving they were the Brothel employee children. I only had a contract signed by Crowley.”

Castiel doesn’t know how to go about his thoughts, but he voices them out anyway, with careful caution. “You told me you’ve been having weird dreams about drowning, and corals. Have you ever heard of the Lost Boy legend?”

“Which version?”

“Whichever.”

“Yeah,” Dean says. “It used to be one of the stories the ladies from the Brothel told me and Sam whenever we were fussy.”

Castiel only grips the hem of his soaked shirt. “The version in Patheo has always been about the Lost Boy being taken away from the King and Queen. He wanders through the forest, talking to Laume, and Green Devils. He decides he wants to bring a gift back to his mother and father.”

“I know that one,” Dean says, eyes narrow. “The boy ends up stealing a few dry corals from one of the Green Devils, and brings it back to his mother. The corals become his crown when his father passes away.”
“Yes,” Castiel says. “The corals symbolize the token a True King will bear once he takes the throne. The Lost Boy stole a valuable token from a Green Devil, and it turned into a crown. Some Archivists believe that corals are a sign of royalty.”

Dean splashes some water on his face. “I’m dreaming of corals.”

Castiel nods. “Jarsaki Kings and Queens have always had a token. It was tradition back then, to present the former King with a stolen thing, something really valuable. Corals were the most popular, hence the Lost Boy legend.”

“So do you think I’m dreaming about Michael?”

“No,” Castiel shakes his head. “I think you’re dreaming of a token. There’s a reason the Lost Boy legend resurfaced when the Winchesters died. How old are you?”

Dean’s catching on pretty quickly. His wildly green eyes meet Castiel’s. His utter confusion shows so clearly on his face, Castiel gets lost in Dean’s feelings.

“I was born before the Winchesters died.”

“Mary Winchester had a boy four years before her death,” Castiel explains, hurriedly. “You’re the same age as the potential heir, if there was proof. Jarsaki royals never announce the name of their child until the child turns ten years old. The kid was four years old when they died, so there is no actual record of him being there. Only rumors going around Patheo.”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m the same age as the fucking heir,” Dean says angrily. “It’s just a fucking dream. I’m a slave, I always was.”

“But what if you aren’t? Your markings, Dean-”

“My markings? How the hell do you know about them?” Dean’s anger is growing with every second. The anger is different from the one Dean shows while he’s fighting. Fighting like this is different than clashing swords.

“They’re the same as the ones John Winchester left in his journals. I have seen them before, I’m sure I have. Charlie still has John’s journals - ”

Dean jumps up, suddenly, and points angrily at Castiel. “Stop this fucking bullshit. I know what you’re thinking, but you’re fucking delusional. I’m no heir, and I’m no Winchester. I’m Dean from the Brothel, a thief, and a liar. Stop thinking of me as some profound leader that got lost years ago.”

“But Dean, what if - ”

“No if. I’m not the fucking True King of Jarsaki. Fuck you.”

Dean walks away, hunched and angry, leaving Castiel fuming inside of his own skin.

***

Two weeks pass. Castiel trains Dean still, but all hint of friendship has disappeared into thin air. His strict demeanor is disheartening, makes Dean feel like he wants to crawl underneath his bed covers, and stay there for the time being. There’s another option of apologizing, thinking about what Castiel
has said, but Dean doesn’t have it in him to confront Castiel. After Michael on friday, Dean walks back to the Dungeon, thinking that maybe, just maybe, he’ll find Castiel in the gem storage, with mead and food. It’s the only comforting thought he has after listening to Michael talk about his political stance on Salitia, and their Dragossi. Michael never talks about anything else. Only about his rings, about Claws, who he never even visits after that one time she nearly bit his arm off, and about his plans, with travels he would like to go on with Evia.

The storage room is eerily empty. Dean does what he always done when he’s distressed - he goes to Claws, who sends her warmth down their bond.

Following the line, he finds Claws flying around next to the Dungeon lake, with Samandriel quietly sitting in the middle of a few old Dragossi. Dean recognizes some of them from their nests, their blue and green scales telling him they’re of the Tree Green and Blue Water Dragossi. Claws feels intimidated by them. Dean tells her it’s normal to feel this way when you’re the baby. She snorts annoyed smoke out through her nose, making Samandriel open his eye to see Dean coming to sit next to him.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?”

“Oh, that’s rich, Dean,” Samandriel says, exhaling through his nose. His relaxed pose reminds Dean of a sleeping Dragossi. “Go away.”

Dean plops down, knee almost touching Samandriel’s. “I’m having a fight with Cas.”

“We could, you know, sit in silence,” Samandriel says, breathing in heavily, like he’s meditating. “Or, you could leave me alone. So I can sit in silence by myself.”

Claws flies over, perching on top of Dean’s shoulders. She’s too big to fit in Dean’s shirt now. “I want to apologize without really apologizing. It was real fucked up of him to assume that I’m someone else that I’m not.”

Samandriel closes his eyes. An older, Blue Water Dragossi nuzzles her head into Samandriel’s thigh. “You’re rambling. If you’re having a spat, I’m not the person to help you deal with it. You’re both adults. Talk it out.”

“You’re as bad at communicating as Cas,” Dean sighs.

“Castiel is a great teacher, then,” Samandriel says, the first hint of amusement in his voice is mocking. “Don’t you have a brother you could pester about this? I am not about to give you any advice.”

Dean simply stares at him. “I find it really fucking hard to believe that whenever you open your mouth, it doesn’t piss me off. You’re kinda like my brother; you’re annoying, but I like you a lot. Talking to you feels like I’m torn between wanting to punch you or hang out with you.”

Samandriel’s angelic features don’t change, but Dean feels how Samandriel’s surprise seeps through his skin. It’s as if an innocent comment like this changed his entire demeanor. The snarky smile is gone, there’s only shocked silence left. Samandriel’s voice trembles slightly when he says, “So this is why Castiel likes being around you.”

“Pffft. What, he likes how I compare people to my brother?”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Samandriel says. “You just manage extinguishing any and all defensive feelings I have for you. I’ve had my reservations, but Claws must have chosen the right person for her. Moments like this make me understand she’s made a good choice.”
“That’s probably the nicest thing you’ve ever told me,” Dean says. It’s his turn to feel shock. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t even know how to continue our conversation. I’m feeling kinda awkward.”

“Sorry,” Samandriel says, looking down at his hands. “I ruined the moment, haven’t I?”

“You didn’t;” Dean laughs. “I just didn’t expect you to be this emotional about me asking to hang out.”

Samandriel murmurs something underneath his breath.

“What’s that?” Dean asks, genuinely confused.

Samandriel takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and says, “Yeah. I’d like to hang out with you.”

Dean grins, patting a small bag he carried with him. “That’s fucking great. Because I have a book here I’d like to read with you. And then we can talk about Castiel.”

Samandriel all but groans, but there’s no malice behind his eyes. “You two are insufferable. Before he went out, he went on and on about you, it was a nightmare.”

“Is he angry?”

“Talk to him,” Samandriel says. “You two are really good at it.”

Dean pauses, and opens the book, deep in thought.

***

Castiel has tremendously fucked up. He can’t look Dean in the eye without thinking he has crossed a line of comfort without considering how Dean would feel about the entire claim that he’s the Lost Boy. Castiel is still reeling from the sort of revelation, he daydreams about Dean sitting in the throne as he finally feels free from Michael’s prison. He keeps noticing all of these things about Dean - his natural talent to bring people together, his loyalty, tact, his creative problem solving. It makes more and more sense, but Castiel’s afraid of talking with him. For a man who has always confronted other people when he wanted to talk it out, he’s doing a really bad job at it with Dean.

He takes Jarra out of her nest, and leads her to the Dungeon lake when Dean leaves for a meeting with Michael. She’s excited for a potential trip, already flexing her wings out.

Castiel finds Samandriel sitting with a few Dragossi, alone.

“I’m going out,” he says, clearing his throat. His palms are sweating.

Samandriel rolls his eyes. “I don’t care.”

Castiel pats Jarra on her back, raising his eyebrow at Samandriel’s answer. “Aren’t you going to ask me where I’m going?”
“No,” Samandriel says. “You’re abandoning Dean after a fucking meeting with Michael.”

His words stab Castiel in his heart. “He can take care of himself.”

“Oh yeah? I bet you twenty rings he’s going to come out and bother me when he doesn’t find you waiting.”

“Tell him you’re busy,” Castiel says, placing the saddle on Jarra. “He has other friends.”

Samandriel glares at him for a few seconds, trying to piece the details together. It clicks when Castiel avoids Samandriel’s stern look. “Did you two have a fight?”

“I wouldn’t call it a fight,” Castiel admits. Jarra drinks from the lake, lazy to listen in on their conversation. “I wanted to talk about some things, and he very adamantly told me to fuck off, then stormed away.”

“I’m really happy to know that you’re upgrading to silence without figuring his side of things first,” Samandriel says, pursing his lips.

Castiel sighs, climbing up on Jarra’s back. “When did you start caring about Dean’s side of things? I recall you weren’t very happy I invited him to stay with us.”

“Claws likes him,” Samandriel shrugs. “And you two fighting isn’t going to help any of us concentrate on how to keep Michael at bay with his fucking shenanigans.”

Jarra leans into Castiel’s touch. “Well, I’m going to try to make things better. I won’t be able to talk to him without offering a token of peace beforehand.”

“Where are you going?”

“Now you want to know.”

Samandriel starts speaking again, but Castiel squeezes his thighs, and Jarra flies. The sand-wall orb explodes into a wonderful arc, leaving Castiel dry. It’s early dusk outside, the Giants shower in the setting sun, their angry faces look almost red from here. Castiel’s dressed in his dark tunic, something less royal than he did last time he visited the Brothel. Patheo is lively, now, with chatter filling the streets below. Some people point at the sky, seeing a magnificent Dragossi fly over their heads. Castiel closes his eyes against the breeze and the sun, his heart is beating fast and hard. He feels phantom hands on his, the warmth of Dean’s skin is a really pleasant memory. Wanting to make things right between them again is a foreign thought, something Castiel hasn’t really done since Balthazar. It doesn’t hurt thinking about him anymore. Castiel holds onto the memories, but mourns him no more. Balthazar’s place in Castiel’s heart is distant, now, with someone green-eyed and freckled pushing the pain out of the way.

Jarra’s uncomfortable when they fly over the forest toward the village of Rathi. She whines, and smoke comes out of her lungs, so Castiel leans in closer and tells her they’re not going to enter today. She picks up speed, maneuvering over the forest, flying a little higher.

He asks her to land further away, once again avoiding the seeing eyes of the rich villagers. Not a lot of Dragossi fly around Jarsaki these days, and another slumbering in the snow next to a very pompous village isn’t the best of ideas. Castiel hurries down the beautiful homes of the crow people, through the marketplace, and into the street of the Brothel district. The Rose Brothel stands where it always has, with the alchemical roses growing near the entrance. Their thorns glitter in the setting sun, like Jarra’s scales.
Castiel walks in, and he’s very surprised there aren’t any clients or Brothel boys and girls around. The usual chairs lined with fancy furs, and glitter ponds remain untouched and calm, the walls are covered with famous paintings. Castiel walks over to the counter, and sees there’s a bell.

He picks it up, chiming it once. Twice.

Crowley walks out through one of the doors in the back, dressed in a dark, silver embroidered coat, his bug eyes fixate on Castiel.

“You again,” he remarks. “Come to buy another one of my boys?”

“No,” Castiel says, tapping his fingers on the dark red marble of the counter. “I’m happy enough with two of your best. I’m here for a different reason.”

Crowley’s eyebrows shoot up. “If you’d like a Brothel boy or a girl to warm your bed tonight, I’m afraid there are no openings -”

“Gods, no! No, no, I’m here to ask for a favor. Dean has told me he has left a precious trinket behind, I’d like to collect it for him.”

Crowley sighs, bracing himself over the counter. “Are you a Prince, or a gods-damned postal service? If he wants his things back, he should come back here and get it himself.”

Castiel scratches behind his neck, feeling a blush coming up. “He doesn’t know I’m here.”

The Brothel owner’s face remains as deadpan, with no other emotion crossing his features. He walks around the counter, and beckons Castiel to come with. Castiel walks behind Crowley, leaving the glitter ponds and the beautiful entrance behind. They enter through a raggedy door, where the walls are wooden, no decorations line the floor, there’s nothing but doors and chatter from every direction.

“This is where I house our staff,” Crowley explains. “I haven’t found a replacement for Dean and Sam, but I cannot promise you their room hasn’t been raided by other workers underneath my roof.”

Crowley opens up a small door at the end of the corridor. It’s a little bit cold inside, and there are two beds, with simple covers and a small table with open books on top. Castiel smiles, thinking of Sam. It must have been hard growing up in a Brothel, and trying to teach yourself how to read, how to write, and how to live. Castiel recognizes Sam’s side, the smart mess left behind in a hurry. Dean’s bed, however, is clean. Organized. With a few trinkets hung on top of the chair. To Castiel’s relief, nothing has been touched and he sees the necklace almost instantly. It’s a cute pendant, with a simple face, two horns growing out its head. Castiel takes it with trembling fingers, pockets it, and turns to Crowley.

“Thank you,” he says. “How can I repay your kindness?”

Crowley shakes his head. “No need, Your Majesty. You’ve given enough. How could I ever say no to a man who paid so much for simple slaves?”

“So they were truly slaves,” Castiel says with a deep sadness. “Dean hasn’t talked about it much.”

Crowley looks around the room, breathing in deeply as if reminiscing. “I took them in when Sam was but a baby, and Dean was only four years old. I didn’t want to bear the burden, but just like you, someone made an offer I couldn’t resist. They weren’t bad boys, really helped me take care of my business. I hate to be sentimental, but I miss Dean’s organizational skills, and Sam’s clerk abilities.
They were good men, and I am sure they are going to turn into even better men serving you.”

Castiel smiles to himself. “They don’t serve me. They’re free to do what they want.”

“So what are they to you?”

Castiel pauses. “My friends.”

Crowley levels him with a look. There’s an uncomfortable silence, until he says, “Oh yes. Dean is your friend.”

Castiel fails to see what’s behind Crowley’s words. “Thank you, Crowley. I won’t be bothering you again.”

“Do bother us once in a while,” Crowley says. “Our Brothel is the best in Jarsaki.”

“I’m grateful for the offer, but I’m uninterested.”

“I know,” Crowley says, leading Castiel back to the exit. “It’s only business, my Prince.”

Castiel flies back home with a lighter heart, and his fingers wrapped around the small pendant, holding it safe.
The Wanderer

Chapter Summary


It’s the start of autumn, three full weeks after Dean has started a weird friendship with Samandriel. Castiel has started talking to him again during their sword training sessions, as well as whenever they went to see Charlie and Sam in the Archives. They haven’t talked about their fight yet, but it doesn’t make Dean squirm like it did before. Now he’s just happy Castiel isn’t mentioning anything about his memory loss, or the marks on his skin. And since he does know about the markings, Dean thinks he trusts him enough to ask if he’d like to join him in the baths today. They’ve been cleaning out nests and trying to teach the little ones how to crunch their gems without getting bits and pieces stuck inside of their throats all day. Dean cleans his tools up, building up some confidence to just ask Castiel out. Fucking hell, this was hard enough with Aaron, why is it even worse with a person he genuinely wants to kiss?

Dean’s been thinking a lot about Castiel’s lips. His hands, especially. The one time they got drunk together felt sort of like a date, but it wasn’t enough to satisfy Dean’s hunger for more. Castiel’s warmth stays with him, and it makes Dean’s heart thump really fucking hard.

“Hey Cas?” Dean says, thinking it’s now or never.

Castiel, who is cleaning his hands with a wet rag, lifts his eyes to Dean’s. The blue is shining due to shitty alchemical lighting. He’s as dirty as Dean, sweat lines the nape of his neck. “Yes?”

Dean fidgets, tapping his fingers on a shovel he stashed away, his free hand on his hip. “You think we could go to the baths together? Like, we could save a lot of time instead of waiting for our turn.”

Shit. Fuck. That’s not what he wanted to say. His sweaty palms, and shaky breath is making his head dizzy. Castiel stares at him for a second too long, then, with an obvious blush on his face, he looks down and throws the rag near the tools. “We could. If you’re alright with me seeing - you know. Seeing you.”

Dean nearly has a heart attack at the thought of Castiel naked. He gulps down the damn nerves, and remembers Castiel probably isn’t thinking of seeing Dean’s birthday suit. Shaking his head, Dean gestures at his own chest and stomach, frowning. “You already know I have ’em. I’ve only ever been to the baths with Sam, so what the hell would I get for hiding my marks from you? Nothing. All I’m seeing is us both sitting in a cold pool, and you telling me some legends, man.”

Castiel’s wide eyes and gaping mouth make Dean even more nervous.

“What?” Dean asks.
“The cold baths? I’ve never used one in my life.”

“Seriously? Cas, it’s like the best part of being Jarsakian.”

“I tend to avoid anything cold,” Castiel says, scratching his neck. “I get enough of that from my room.”

Dean can’t stop himself from saying, “My bed’s still warm.”

The man in front of him changes whenever they’re flirting. Castiel’s blush intensifies, the shy little smile returns from hiding, his eyes twinkle and he avoids Dean’s waiting gaze. Gods, Dean absolutely loves bringing this side of Castiel out into light.

“I should be fine bathing in one of the baths next to the cold one,” he says, slightly stumbling over his words. “Should we go now? Unless you - you have something to do, well, beforehand.”

Dean simply shakes his head, a smile playing on his lips. “Nah. I’d like to go get clean.”

Castiel nods, and they start walking until Castiel stops Dean with a hand on his shoulder. “Go and change,” he says, eyes still lowered and the flush still there. “I have to go grab something. It’ll take a minute, I promise.”

“Ain’t hurrying nowhere, Cas,” Dean says, savoring the warmth from Castiel’s hand. Castiel excuses himself and runs through one of the corridors leading to the Curtain Hall.

Dean walks over to the baths, sending Claws some images of himself and Castiel. Claws responds by chirping through her bond. She’s with a few other Dragossi right now, playing catch, safe as she can be. Dean asks her if he could close the bond for an hour or two, to which she simply sends a good luck charm and a Dragossi mating song down the line.

You’re too young to know this! he tells her.

Her echoing song disappears when she pulls up the wall between her and Dean, leaving only the line of red in Dean’s chest. It’s silent in his head.

Dean walks inside of the small antechamber, and starts undressing. Placing all of his dirty clothes inside of one of the woven boxes, he only wears his undergarments, thinking they’re Jarsakians and they can’t just go around naked without first kissing each other. It’s weird, because Dean’s experience with anything sexual had been with one man, and one man only. So what if? What if Castiel decides he’d like to go sleep with Dean in Dean’s bed, what if their little dance is going to take another turn tonight? Dean should have prepared better. Already half-hard, he takes a towel, and wraps it around his waist.

Castiel walks in as well, and stops after seeing Dean half naked. Dean enjoys it all too much when he understands that Castiel’s incapable of speaking, his eyes slowly traveling all over Dean’s body.

Weakly, Castiel says, “You’ve put on a lot of muscle.”

Dean looks down at his hands and legs. It’s true. After so many months of training constantly, taking care of Dragossi, he’s as ripped as Castiel. Dean’s hip bones are even more visible above the towel. Throwing his arms apart, he smiles, and says, “Like what you see?”

Castiel hurriedly undresses himself, turning his back to Dean. “I do,” he says, voice unwavering. Dean’s mind stops working for a millisecond. Castiel’s broad shoulders move with grace as he’s taking his shirt off, and then reveals his legs, those calves perfectly toned. Dean’s drinking it all in
with just one sweep, his breath comes in short. It barely registers that Castiel’s answering his flirtation with confidence.

Not knowing what to say, Dean simply waits until Castiel wraps a towel around himself too, and they can enter the baths together. The tension between them doesn’t subside a bit even when they’re walking through the various baths. Castiel only starts speaking when they reach some of the colorful ones Dean tends to walk around and never get into.

“I really enjoy these Nethereal baths,” he says, pointing at the bright green one. “I do believe it’s infused with seaweed and salt.”

“How the hell do you get Netherean seaweed in here?” Dean asks, brows furrowed. The green light reflects on Castiel pretty nicely. “Isn’t it like crazy expensive to smuggle anything out of that place?”

Castiel shrugs, and drops his towel. He’s also wearing some undergarments, to Dean’s disappointment. He slides in, leaving Dean on the edge, testing the water with his toe. Castiel says, “It is. Which is why I’m incredibly grateful we have one of the rarest baths in Jarsaki at our own disposal. Come try it out.”

“Should I?” Dean says. The water feels fine, but he’s not so happy about knowing he’s going to feel seaweed against his feet. “I’m fond of the cold bath, not these fancy ass salt water hot baths.”

Castiel wades in. There’s enough room for three people. “Trying out something new won’t hurt you, Dean,” he says, smiling. The green shades on his face look inviting. “The salt is really good for your skin.”

“My skin is fine,” Dean says. There’s nothing else to do but to join Castiel. So he does.

The first touch of water down to his calves is incredibly soothing. Dean climbs in, feeling the softness of the seaweed with his toes, and then settles on the stone bench carved for sitting. Castiel’s leg touches his, Dean’s already really happy with his choice to ask Castiel out here.

“Well?”

“I don’t know,” Dean says, flexing his fingers in the water, watching them change color from pink to green from the seaweed. “Feels fine.”

Castiel levels him with a look.

“Okay, it feels awesome. Fuck you.”

It looks as if Castiel has a comeback at the tip of his tongue, but he doesn’t say it. Instead, he relaxes, and washes his face.

They change a few more baths. Castiel is very happy to show Dean the wonders of baths from all over Serationia - from poisonous mushroom extract baths Dean refuses to get in, and then to simple baths filled with different scents. They find a bath they’re both comfortable in laying for a longer amount of time, which is a really nice bubbly rose-water one.

Dean’s markings look embossed in his skin through the bubbles, and he finds Castiel staring at them. He lifts up an arm, showing some of the swirls of another language to him. “The girls back at the Brothel told me it’s a bad sign to have marks on my skin from birth.”

Castiel is silent for a single pause, then says, “It’s not really...a birthmark.”
“I’ve had it since birth, though,” Dean says, already feeling a twinge of anxiety rising up. Even if he doesn’t want to talk about it, Castiel seems apologetic about their last encounter with his speculations.

“Do you remember anything before Sam?”

“I do,” Dean admits, because he truly does. Snippets, sometimes. Short color bursts. “Can we just stop talking about this? I know where you’re going and I’m not sure if I can stop myself from fucking off and not talking to you for like a month.”

Castiel holds up both of his hands in defense, his eyes worried. “Please don’t,” he says, voice hushed. “I won’t talk about it if you want me to. I’ve just...I’ve seen markings like this before.”

“John Winchester’s journals, you mean?” Dean narrows his eyes.

“Not only in them,” Castiel says, avoiding Dean’s look. “The language of Swords, it’s called. I don’t understand it, and neither does anyone in Jarsaki. The language is older than Seratonia. There are some people in Lafallka who could probably read what it says, but it’s been the most difficult language to translate in all of history. I recognized the markings the second I saw them. I really liked going through the um - journals - when I was younger.”

Dean’s hugs himself, kind of hiding from the world. “If they’re not birthmarks, what are they?”

“They’re tattoos,” Castiel explains, taking Dean’s hands into his own, leaving Dean’s chest bare. The water does nothing to conceal Dean’s flush down his neck. “Alchemically induced. They grow with you, and will stay with you for the rest of your life. I have only seen drawings of them in the journals, in clustered pieces on the arms, or legs, but never like this.”

Castiel brushes a hand over Dean’s collarbones, and his fingers stay over Dean’s heart. Dean slowly breathes, feeling as if Castiel will remove his touch if he moves a muscle. He’s so close Dean could lean in and kiss him if he had the guts. “I do remember some things,” Dean mumbles under his breath. “A song. A smile, with so much warmth. Fuck, I remember how I ran down a stone corridor into the arms of a man without a face, but I wasn’t scared of him.”

“None of the Jarsaki homes have stone corridors,” Castiel breathes out. His lips brush against Dean’s cheek, making his breath hitch.

“Can we please not talk about it now?” Dean says, closing his eyes. He’d rather feel Castiel against him rather than start fighting over allegations. Dean’s hands travel over Castiel’s arms, cupping his face with shaking fingers.

Castiel stays in his arms, but doesn’t kiss him. He fits his forehead to Dean’s, breathing slowly. “Then tell me something.”

“Like what?”

“Anything,” Castiel answers. Dean’s mind is empty, Castiel smells so good. He feels so good.

“I’ve been staring at this one statue in the Archives for a while,” he says. Castiel wraps his thighs around Dean, sitting on top for better leverage. Dean knows Castiel’s feeling what’s going on, and it’s even better now that Dean knows Castiel is bold. The shyness is almost gone when they’re like this. They’re chest to chest, breathing in tandem. “Green Devils. I was always afraid of meeting one back at the Brothel, because I knew I’d make a contract with one. I wanted to save Sam. I would have paid a price for him. It’s scary to even think I would’ve done it in a heartbeat. Turns out it was a possibility, because I know one Green Devil, which was a surprise to me and to Sam.”
Castiel’s eyebrows shoot up. “You know a Green Devil?”

“A man who works with Crowley. His name is Pleasure.”

Castiel stops short, his body freezes over Dean’s. The sweet tension between them is subsiding.

“How do you know he’s a Green Devil?”

Dean understands something’s wrong immediately. His hands still clutch Castiel’s shoulders. “One of the statues there is an exact replica of him. Down to his size, his eyes, nose, face, bone structure. I’ve never seen his legs even when he was sitting. He’d disappear for weeks at a time, and news about some Jarsakian Lord would reach Crowley after Pleasure would be back to the Brothel. Everything fits, but one thing doesn’t. If Pleasure felt what I was feeling about Sam, why didn’t he offer anything?”

“I can’t believe it. Green Devils are famous for befriending people of benefit to them.”

“I can’t offer anything back. He was sort of like a father figure to us growing up, and only now I’m questioning his age. I haven’t seen a wrinkle on him, he hasn’t changed in twenty years.”

“When was the first time you saw him?”

“When I was four. Right after my birthday. I remember it clear as day, everything else is muddy.”

Castiel pauses, then swims away from Dean, lifting himself up from the bath. He extends a hand to Dean, and helps him get out. They grab the towels, and Castiel asks Dean to follow him out.

Once they’re back in the antechamber, Castiel digs through his folded clothes, and then turns to Dean with his hand clutching something.

“I know you don’t want to talk about the Lost Boy. I know you don’t believe what I’m thinking is true, but I wanted to apologize by getting this.”

He hands Dean a necklace, the same one Dean foolishly left at the Brothel the day he stole Claws. Dean’s breath stops short, and he slowly thumbs at the chain and the pendant. Sam is going to freak when he sees Dean’s got the necklace back. A wave of gratitude flows through Dean, making his knees weak, and heart beat with affection. He lifts his eyes to Castiel’s, and with a shaking voice, he says, “Thank you. But - what does it have to do with the Green Devil?”

“A Green Devil will never harm a man without malice in his heart. I went to see Crowley, and he only said great things about you. I talk to Charlie, and she’s ecstatic whenever I mention your name. Anna doesn’t have to endure death while she’s alive because you helped her. You would have sold your soul to save your brother. You make me a better person every day, and I wanted to apologize for making you uncomfortable. I’m sorry, Dean.”

Dean wraps his hands around him, holding Castiel close. They stand like this for a minute, before Dean places a butterfly kiss on Castiel’s jaw and puts the necklace on. The familiar feel of it against his chest is so comforting he could cry, but he doesn’t. “I was four when they found me. I don’t know where this idea of yours surfaced, but I’d like more research before I fully commit to finding someone to take Michael down. I’m sorry I reacted this way without listening to what you had to say.”

Castiel smiles, and they both dress without a word. Dean’s nervous, and for a second, he thinks what if.

What if he’s the Lost Boy?
He hides these thoughts away when he goes to see Claws, instead thinking about Castiel’s hands.

***

The dream comes back again, but something’s a little different. This time Dean stays underwater, taking deep breaths through the water, a strange light feeling in his chest telling him it’s alright. That’s he’s not dead. He won’t be dead.

The woman swims up to him with pleading eyes. Dean wants to tell her it’s okay, he doesn’t need her help anymore, but when her blonde hair flows in the water close to him, Dean’s eye catches glimmering in the distance.

Focusing on the glimmer, Dean doesn’t hear the woman speak. He sees two stone eyes directed straight at him, heavy eyelids closing and opening again, the stone Giant seemingly alive in the water. The glimmer, however, comes from the forehead, underneath a crown covered in corals. Dean narrows his eyes to see better.

No fear comes when the glimmer stops, time slows down. Dean’s breath hangs in his lungs. The sword, stuck in between rainbow corals, vibrates with an invitation.

He feels a touch on his hand, but before he can see who it is, Dean wakes up.

No sweat lines his chest anymore. His throat doesn’t feel sandy, and he’s not out of breath. Dean gets up, head light on his shoulders.

Castiel waits for him next to the waterfall, already doing his daily stretches. Claws is playing in the water, her wings flapping waves on the surface. She doesn’t acknowledge that Dean’s here, too busy playing with other Dragossi her age instead. Dean takes a second to watch Castiel’s shoulder blades move against the strain of his muscles, his bed-hair pointing in every direction.

Castiel turns then, his icy blue eyes locking with Dean’s. They’re playing the eye-to-eye game again, but who is Dean to complain? As long as Castiel’s attention is on him.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” Dean swallows the urge to run his hand through Castiel’s hair.

Castiel nods. They don’t have to do much today. Breeding doesn’t start until next week, which means Dean should have more time to spend with Sam. Or, his new favorite hobby, he could read the books stacked in his room. But here he is, walking with Castiel, their hands brushing with every other step.

As per usual, they sit in storage, on the ground. Dean scratches his neck. “I’m having the same dream again,” he starts.

Castiel’s fixated on him as if what Dean’s saying is the most important thing in this world. “The blonde woman?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, exhaling through his nose. “But this time. Uh. I saw a sword. Stuck in the middle of a Giant’s forehead.” He emphasizes this by pressing his pointer finger in between his eyebrows. “There’s something in the lake, Cas. I can feel it.”

Castiel hums. “You think we should go there and try to find what it’s all about?”
Dean bites his lip, thinking. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

Castiel pauses, eyes cast toward Dean’s hand. Moving slowly, he touches Dean’s fingers with his own, then clasps their hands together, squeezing gently. The action drives the breath out of Dean’s chest, but he doesn’t let his nerves show. “You’ve asked me not to talk about the Lost Boy. And I won’t, not when we don’t understand where these dreams are coming from,” he says, calmly. The air between them is intensely thick. “Before we go and find what’s bothering you, we need to know as much as we can about all the Giants that were in the area during the Calamity.”

“What about the sword?” Dean asks. They’re so close to each other, Dean’s can feel Castiel’s breath on his cheek.

“I may have an idea of what it is,” Castiel says. “If your dreams and the markings on your skin mean what I think they mean, we may very well change the course of history.”

Gods. Dean wants to brush his lips against Castiel’s, but his heart doesn’t let him move forward. Castiel’s stagnant, eyes flicking to Dean’s lips now and then. But they don’t move. Castiel’s thumb draws circles on Dean’s hand, as it always does when Castiel’s planning something. Dean doesn’t tell him that he doesn’t want to change history at all, even if the thought doesn’t scare him as much as it did before. He wants to stay here, frozen in time, just like this.

“Should we go now?” Dean asks, a little breathless from the closeness.

Not for the first time, Castiel’s lips brush against Dean’s cheek, and nothing else happens. Not for the first time, Dean longs for him to make the first move, because he can’t do this without him confirming that this is okay. Castiel gets up, offers Dean a hand. Dean grabs it, heart still drumming so fast, it feels like it’s going to burst. Their hands stay linked when as they leave storage. Samandriel sees this, and groans, averting his eyes.
For Castiel, it’s getting harder to resist the temptation. Dean’s animatedly talking about his dream again while they’re walking to the Archives to meet Sam and Charlie, and fuck, Castiel can think of nothing but Dean’s burnt hands.

Castiel won’t cross the line. If he does, Michael will find out, and they’d be done for. The way Michael talks about Dean during their meetings sets a fire inside of Castiel’s heart, painful jealousy soaring so high, he thinks about hitting Michael in the face for being so disgustingly open. Michael knows. He absolutely knows from the way Castiel’s hands tense, the way his face grows red. Dean never talks about what they do during their weekly dinners, but Castiel knows enough not to press. Dean comes back white as a sheet every single time, and goes to Claws’ nest without talking. Very much like Castiel after meetings. He shouldn’t be worried when Dean allows his touches so easily, but here he is. Watching Dean. Longing.

Dean brushes his hand with Castiel’s, smiling so widely it hurts Castiel to know he’d be able to kiss Dean if the threat of Michael wasn’t hovering over them. One thing he knows - he will follow Dean to the edge of this world.

The Archives are dusty, as always, but Sam meets them with a tired smile.

“Where’s Charlotte?” Castiel asks.

Dean and he aren’t holding hands anymore, but Castiel feels Dean’s closeness through every wakeful second.

Sam points over his shoulder, to the giant stacks of books, and barely-standing bookshelves. “She’s trying to arrange the books. How can I help you?”

Dean shares a look with Castiel, and says, “We’re gonna need Charlie for this, no offense, kiddo.”

Sam rolls his eyes. “Is this for one of your ridiculous arguments again?”

“Yes,” Castiel beats him to it. “We need to see chronicles from the time of the Calamity.”

Sam narrows his eyes. “We don’t have any of the chronicles concerning the whole event though -”

Charlie peeks through the stacks, her red hair in a tight bun on top of her head. Her ghostly figure would be even more terrifying if Castiel didn’t know she was alive and well. “The Calamity? What for?”

Dean gestures around him vaguely. “You got any maps or encounters with all the Giants that turned to stone in the area of Patheo?”

“There are like seventeen Giants, it ain’t hard to spot them from the upper levels of the Keep.”

Castiel clears his throat. “Sixteen, now. One of them fell last winter.”

Charlie’s frown is heartbreaking. “Poor buddy. May he rest.”

Sam breathes out, and says, “You need specific locations, or what? I think we have some maps.”

“I’d like to know if there are any Giants that weren’t on any official chronicles. Some of them had to have fallen the instant they turned, right? The ones who didn’t make it?”
Charlie comes over to them, wiping the dust off her dress. “My father kept diaries and sightings from people who were around during that time. I’m sure if Sam and I dig through the older parchments downstairs, we can find something.”

They nod. Charlie offers a cup of tea, and some fruit over at her quarters. Sam sits down with Charlie, which leaves two seats for Dean and Castiel, together on a bench.

Without a second thought, Castiel sits down close enough to Dean that their knees are touching. Dean, without comment, drags his fingers on top of Castiel’s thigh, resting his hand on the knee.

It sends waves of heat down Castiel’s spine. The tea doesn’t help one bit. He tries to think of anything else, rather than about Dean.

“Have you ever heard of the sword Samuel Campbell wielded during the Novak-Campbell war?”

Charlie stops in her tracks, almost over filling her cup. Sam’s curious eyes remain fixated on Castiel. Dean’s watching Castiel as well, brows furrowed slightly. “Cas?”

Castiel doesn’t answer Dean’s unaired question, waiting for Charlie to answer. She sets down the pitcher, fingers shaking a little. “King Campbell’s sword has been lost for a long time,” she says, refusing to meet his eyes.

“You knew him,” Castiel says, sensing there’s even more to this than he’s already figured out. “Your mother was his closest friend. I thought that maybe you’d seen it.”

She stays silent. The room has gone from comfortable to unbearable. Dean’s hand squeezes Castiel’s knee.

“I’ve heard the stories about a legendary sword,” Sam says, unsure of himself. “I think most of us have. There are rumors that once it’s found, the one who wields it is the True King of Jarsaki. It’s been going on for a while, but they’re just rumors.”

Dean nods. “That’s what people are saying. I’ve heard it too.”

Castiel doesn’t let his gaze wander off Charlie, who’s getting more dead every second she spends here. “That isn’t true, though,” he says. “I’ve heard all the different versions, the fairy tales. What I do know is that the sword isn’t lost at all. It’s been handed down over centuries, from parent to child.”

Charlie lets out a shaky breath.

Castiel continues, “Samuel Campbell gave it to his daughter. Mary Campbell. She was supposed to give it over to her son. It hasn’t been seen since the Winchester family tragedy.”

“The Lost Boy and the Lost Sword,” Charlie says, her hands shaking. Dean’s hand tightens on Castiel’s knee. “No, I haven’t seen it.”

“Not even when Samuel had it?”

“Especially when he did. He hasn’t wielded it once throughout his life. The one he used for war was a replica.”

Castiel’s eyebrows rise. Dean and Sam look at Charlie, mouths open.

She sighs. “I shouldn’t be talking about it anyway. The royal family has been keeping this a secret
for years. And it’s true. Only a true royal, true Jarsaki King can hold the sword, because. Well.”

“Well?”

Her eyes are filled with tears. “Because the sword holds a bound Dragossi. There was a Fourth Dragossi, the one history didn’t know about. A shadow, the smaller brother of the Three Rider Dragossi. A true legend.

The Dragossi answers to blood. And since the sword is bound, an untrue King will never be able to even lift it up off the ground. Michael knows this, and he has been trying to find and destroy it for years. Ever since the Winchesters. It’s a token of the royal family, just like corals, to some extent.”

“Why?” Dean’s voice shakes.

Charlie clutches her cup so hard, the black veins on her skin pop up. “Because he knows that if the Lost Winchester Boy finds the sword, he’s going to fall from his Throne.”

The change in Dean is evident. The words Castiel’s said, the sword in his dreams, the markings of John Winchester on his body, it all points arrows toward Castiel’s truth. Dean stands up, and storms off.

“What’s gotten into him?” Sam’s worried.

Castiel just shakes his head. “It’s his burden to bear. He’ll tell you himself, when he’s ready.”

Charlie understands. Castiel knows that she knows. Her eyes are filled to the brim with tears, and all she can do is say, “Yeah, Sam. Let your brother cool down.”

“What are you not telling me?” Sam says angrily. “Dean’s never kept a secret from me.”

Castiel feels pity for Sam. “I’m sorry, Sam.”

Sam’s the second one to storm off.

***

Inside, Dean feels as if he’s going to die. The panic sets in his chest, hands shake, teeth clenched so hard his jaw hurts. All of his mind stays in one place, screaming at him that he doesn’t want this to be true. The universe is playing a joke on him, a huge, practical joke he doesn’t yet understand the importance of.

Distantly, he feels Claws thrash in her nest, calling out to him. Dean knows she wants to calm him down, but the urge to go see her is less strong than the urge to smash the Dungeon into pieces.

Dean knows the sword is in the lake. Now, he understands what the lake is trying to tell him, and he decides he doesn’t want to go there, he doesn’t want to see the same stone eyes staring at him while he debates whether taking the sword into his hands is a good idea.

He sits on his bed, head in his hands. Dean’s shoulders are shaking, feet firmly planted on the floor. He doesn’t even hear Castiel come in, until he’s kneeling in front of him, taking Dean’s hands in his, kissing his knuckles.
“I didn’t want to be right,” he says, eyes full of worry. The sincerity is killing Dean from the inside. “A part of me still hopes it’s not true.”

Dean stares into those blue eyes. The panic inside of him roars even louder. “I don’t want to be King.”

“It’s still not clear if you’re the Lost Boy. You didn’t have a name yet, when you got lost.”

The simmering anger inside of Dean’s chest is rising. “I’m not the fucking Lost Boy. I’m not anything. I will not be responsible for a fucking war inside of Jarsaki, or a war with Nethereal. You can’t ask me to do this.”

Castiel places his fingers on Dean’s cheek. Leaning into his touch, Dean’s even more heartbroken. He doesn’t want the responsibility of a country. Doesn’t want the responsibility of finding the sword. Fighting Michael for the throne. He doesn’t want to kiss Castiel first.

“I’m not asking anything of you, Dean,” Castiel says, quietly. As if he’s more afraid than Dean. “I would never. What I’d like you to do, though, is think about this. This is a choice I can’t make for you.”

Dean knows this. Either he finds out his true identity, or he pretends it doesn’t exist. There’s going to be a war either way. No matter what he wants.

He needs Castiel to make at least one choice for him. He doesn’t want to be responsible for anything else. “Can you decide something else for me, then?” His voice is strained, almost silent. Edging on breaking.

“Anything,” Castiel says.

“Kiss me,” Dean breathes out.

He closes his eyes, the horrible feeling of his chest locked in a cage growing within seconds of him asking for something he’s not ready for. But Dean’s hands grip his knees, nails digging into the fabric of his pants. Time passes, but nothing happens.

Dean opens one eye to Castiel not even close enough to him, distanced, in thought.

Heart stopping, Dean says, “You don’t want to.”

Those blue eyes come up, with so much emotion Dean’s learned to read throughout the time they spent together. Castiel’s hand travels down his cheek, to his neck, brushing fingers against sensitive skin under Dean’s ear. “You’re not in the right mindset,” is all he says.

Dean’s shaking from boiling red inside of his chest. Embarrassment, anger, hurt, ice cold rage courses through him. Claws tries sending some comforting thoughts, but Dean closes it off, leaves the line silent. The wall goes up inside of his head, and he hits Castiel’s hand away. “Get the fuck out.”

“Dean, it’s not that I don’t want to.”

Dean then crawls up his bed, still facing Castiel. His face is set in stone. “Get out,” he says, eyes burning. “Now.”

“I’m -”
“Castiel.” Dean’s dead-set on making him go. Using his full name seems to do it. Castiel’s eyes change from worry to hurt in a single moment. Dean’s heart screams at him to say something, stop Cas from going, he wants to tell him to stay, but the anxiety rises, the feeling of rejection is stronger.

Castiel leaves.

Dean’s on the bed, breathing heavily, staring at the door. After a while, his room is trashed to pieces. Dean buries himself under the covers, chest heavy. He’s so out of breath, it takes him a while to fall asleep. He stares at the ceiling until his eyes close, and he succumbs to darkness.

***

Castiel sends out a message through the fire, just as Pleasure had asked. He avoids the Dungeon, hoping Samandriel will take care of their evening chores. Makes a mental note to apologize later. Now, he stands in front of his bowl of simmering coals, waiting for Pleasure’s answer.

A blue fire spews out from the bowl, and Castiel grabs his winter coat, out through the red curtain in seconds.

Pleasure meets him in one of the slum taverns, dressed, as always, in a lacy iridescent coat, drawing everyone’s attention. He gives a few coins to the Owner, and leads Castiel to one of the unoccupied rooms above the tavern, under the guise of work.

Castiel sits on the shitty bed, hearing it squeak and rattle. Pleasure stands in front of him, hands crossed on top of his chest. He doesn’t look even a little cold.

“Dean’s the True King,” Castiel breathes out.

Pleasure slow blinks. “What the fuck do I get out of this information?”

Castiel bites his lip until it bleeds. “Thought you should know you were right.”

Pleasure does a small curtsy, says nothing.

“I’ve come to trust you,” Castiel says. Pleasure’s getting more uninterested every second. “Given the fact you’ve warned me about the sword and the Lost Boy making an appearance, I figured you’re my only hope out of this mess. You have contacts with most of the Jarsakian Lords, or so I’ve heard.”

“No,” Pleasure says, his eyes narrow.

“I want to ask for a favor.”

“I don’t know any damned Jarsaki Lords.”

Castiel locks eyes with Pleasure’s, pleading. “Dean’s told me you’ve been going in and out of the Brothel, working in other cities. Some of the Lords came into power quicker than anything I’ve ever seen, and it’s always been that way, the second you traveled out of Rathi. Please don’t lie to me. I do consider us to be friends.”

Pleasure sighs, and sits down next to him. “You do know what I am, Prince?”

Castiel lowers his eyes. “Yes.”
“Then you know there’s a price.”

Castiel closes his eyes, breathing in deeply. His hands slightly shake. The light inside is dim, Pleasure’s eyes show their true deep forest green, illuminating his face. Pleasure’s a beautiful creature. But when he sees the green, he knows he likes another shade much better. “I’m ready to do anything once he has the sword. He doesn’t want to cause a war, which means we need all of the Lords on our side. We need your magic, your influence and your trust.”

Pleasure takes Castiel’s hand into his, much more like a friend, than a lover. His stoic expression changes into something more real within seconds. Pleasure’s feeling what’s going on in Castiel’s chest, one of the magical abilities Castiel’s read about in books about Devils. Pleasure’s brows furrow. “That’s not exactly what you wanted to talk about. You’re hurting, but it isn’t because of our deal-to-be. What’s going on in that pretty head of yours, Castiel?”

“I’m in love with him,” Castiel says. He’s admitting to it. It’s so hard saying it out loud, but with Pleasure, it feels more like a much-needed confession rather than an admittance of a secret he isn’t supposed to talk about.

Pleasure gives him one of those cunning smiles. “Oh,” he says. “Unexpected.”

Castiel blinks a few times. “You sound like it’s not news to you.”

“I’ve seen how you look at him,” Pleasure explains. “He looks the same way at you. It’s not hard to put two and two together.”

There’s no need to ask Pleasure where and when he’s seen the two of them together. With a power like this, Pleasure can easily enter any room, unnoticed.

“He asked me to kiss him today,” Castiel says. “And I couldn’t do it. He was panicking, not exactly in the right mind to do something that would jeopardize us both when we’re lying to Michael. He took it as rejection.”

“You should have seen him when he was with that Aaron boy,” Pleasure snorts. “Never made the first move. Aaron had to work for Dean’s trust a while, but in the end, the boy couldn’t be what Dean needed the most.”

“What does he need?” Castiel asks quietly.

“You,” Pleasure answers.

Castiel’s silence and quiet realization makes the room feel stuffed, like there’s no air to breathe. He wishes Dean could be here. Could tell him that if they had kissed, there would be no consequences.

Pleasure continues, “I’ve watched him since he was a little child. He’s always had a knack for bringing people together, taking leadership where it was needed. I’ve seen him interact with the Kitchens back in the Brothel, how he helped them make the best out of a dire situation when the Brothel had an overflow of customers. He was born to rule, just as Mary Campbell was. Just as John Winchester was, when Mary took him off his Lordship. Dean has everything a King needs, but one thing he does not. No one has ever showed him what love can be. Dean’s worked for people all his life, and no one worked for him. So my advice is - do not fuck with his trust. Show him he can be loved, unconditionally, if you truly do love him. With you by his side, he will make wonders out of Jarsaki.”

“He is loved,” Castiel says quietly, looking at his hands. “By Sam, Charlie, Benny. Everyone he meets, he wins their affection. How can I show him what being loved is like, when he’s already
loved?

Pleasure places his head on Castiel’s shoulder, resting. “Not this kind of love,” he says. “Not the way I can feel what you feel.”

Castiel doesn’t answer. Their companionable silence is wonderful, but when Castiel thinks how Dean’s alone in his room, panicking, his heart clenches.

Pleasure knows this, and gets up from his seat, leaving Castiel’s warm shoulder. “I will help you, once Dean makes his decision. You will pay the price then.”

“What do you want?” Castiel asks, when Pleasure’s halfway through the door. The iridescent coat shows his glimmering skin.

Pleasure smiles. “We’re friends,” he says. “But even here I must adhere to the rules. I want your Storm Dragossi.”

Castiel releases his breath when he hears that Pleasure’s gone down the stairs.

***

Dean ignores Samandriel in the morning. Castiel’s nowhere to be seen, so Samandriel’s been angrily mumbling while feeding some of the hatchlings. Dean helps him haul the gem bags, then fills up the hay for some Blue Dragossi. Samandriel stops talking when he notices Dean’s not listening. They work in silence.

After a few hours of working his ass off, Dean apologizes to Samandriel, and goes into storage to find unpolished rubies, the ones Claws like the most. When he enters through the nest door, Claws has her back to him.

“I, um,” he says, unsure of himself. He’s still blocked the bond, afraid of feeling her hurt. “I brought you some treats.”

Claws puffs smoke out of her nose, but doesn’t look his way. Dean lowers the bag of rubies next to her tail, noting she’s gonna need some polishing later.

“I missed you,” he said.

No answer.

“Claws, come on. Talk to me.”

She opens one of her red eyes, very sarcastically puffing another cloud of smoke into his face. Dean knows there’s no other way to apologize, so he sits down in a lotus position, holds out his waiting hands, and drops the wall.

A wave of anger, hurt, worry hits him like an explosion, and it’s hard to breathe for a moment. Claws, realizing Dean’s let her in again, slowly turns in her too small nest, moving her wings careful not to hit Dean. She’s bigger than him now, so when she noses his hands, he can’t believe she used to fit in them. She lowers down her emotions, but Dean clings to her, and says through his teeth, “No. Let me feel everything. I want to go through this, like you went through it.”
She whines, trying to get away from Dean, worry flashing through the bond. As much as she is hurt, she’s trying to get Dean to stop taking everything in. He groans, his chest tight with a sort-of betrayal she’s feeling.

Tears roll down his cheeks from the overflow of pain, and he murmurs, his throat tight with tears, “I’m so sorry. I’ll never hide from you again. I promise. I promise you.”

Claws hides him underneath her wings, all while Dean sends her memories from yesterday. How scared he is of being in control of a whole fucking country, how ridiculous he feels around Cas, and how badly he wants Castiel to make the first step. He apologizes to her for not sharing his pain with her. He apologizes for not trusting her to help him.

Dean’s exhausted by the time both of them are calm, laying in the nest. The gems are scattered on the floor, glittering around them. Claws is wrapped around him, her black scales digging into his skin. Dean misses when she could fit into his shirt, but even now, one of her sharp claws is hitched underneath the linen.

He thinks about Michael, and his rough hands on him, how disgusted he feels whenever Michael’s close to him. Dean doesn’t know how long he can play this game of Salitian decency, when he sees Michael’s burning need to touch Dean. Dean wishes that Castiel could kiss all of this away, brush his fingertips everywhere Michael’s touched him. Take the disgust away. Make it good.

He shares this with Claws, who sends him the smell she felt the first night they met, when she flew over the lake. Dean freezes.

“Wait,” he says weakly, looking at her through narrowed eyes. “What do you mean the smell felt familiar?”

She sends an array of memories. Claws is comparing her own smell with the one she felt at the lake, the one she so desperately wanted to reach. How scared she was when Dean was drowning. Her annoyance with Castiel, but gratitude when he dragged him out of the water.

Dean stops her there. “Are you feeling a Red Ruby?”

She lets out some smoke through her nostrils, huffing. The images tell him that she does feel like the smell is family, but it’s distant. What she did smell was Dean’s blood mixed with hers.

Dean, with his hands shaking, sends her the same memories of his dream. The sword. Claws pushes up with her wings, starts nudging him.

“I don’t want to go there.”

She stares at him for a second, with her cold red eyes. It’s as if she’s raising her nonexistent eyebrow.

Dean shakes his head, and corrects himself, “I don’t want to be King.”

Claws shows him images of her fear of Michael, of a war she doesn’t want to partake in at all, of Castiel leading an army, of blood, terrifying alchemy, of Zhwai joining Michael with their dark magic words, Dean covered in blood, choking on a punctured lung with her by his side. Dean shrouded in a cloud of smoke, kneeling next to Castiel, who lies with his eyes open, but no breath coming out of his lungs-

Dean realizes she’s listing everything that would happen if Michael would win. Then, she starts sending out images of him as King, of the battle between him and Michael, and then her happily biting his head off. Dean, dressed in Jarsaki black, no gems, no embroidery, but the crown on his
head, with Claws by his side. The battlefield is filled with cheering people.

Dean stops breathing. She nudges him again, and before he can open his mouth to tell her what he’s afraid of again, the nest door opens.

Turning to see Castiel, who looks worse for wear, Dean realizes. He’d do anything to protect Sam, Claws, Charlie, Benny, and most of all, Castiel. If he has to fight Michael alone, and create a war he can fight by himself, okay. He can do this. He can absolutely fucking do this.

Castiel raises a plate of fruit. “I wanted to talk to you,” he says, eyes cast downward.

Claws pushes her nose into Dean’s side, urging him to go with Castiel. They can go to the lake later. *Let him know how you feel, like you told me.*

_No promises_, he tells her. He nods at Castiel, and pats Claws’ head before following him out of her nest. He hears the crunch of her eating the rubies. Their bond is once again in calm waters.

***

Castiel couldn’t sleep all night after meeting Pleasure. The shadows underneath Dean’s eyes are untold stories of exhaustion, but Dean’s comfortable silence doesn’t have any signs of malice. Only deep thought. His eyebrows are scrunched up.

Handing him the plate of fruit, Castiel leads him into storage, where he’s placed a woven mat with pitchers of honey wine on the side. There’s a wild berry pie in the middle, soft cushions for sitting, and the company of glittering gems.

Dean stops, eyes snapping to Castiel’s. “What’s this?”

“An apology,” Castiel says, sitting down. He taps the space next to him. “I was out of line. I’m sorry I pressured you into making a decision that’d be best for me, without thinking about your wishes.”

“Cas, I-”

Castiel raises a hand. “I’m going to stop asking you to find out whether you’re the Lost Boy. If you don’t want to, then you don’t need to.”

“Dude-”

“Michael won’t stand forever, maybe we can figure out a plan-”

“Cas-”

“There’s other ways-”

“Stop,” Dean interrupts, deadpan. Castiel’s chest is moving up and down, breathing deeply. Dean looks ethereal in the dim lights, the colors of rubies, topaz reflections, and sapphire dancing on his face. He continues, placing both hands on his hips, looks down at his feet. “I get it. You were thinking about the future of Jarsaki. Something I’ve never done in my life.”

“I’m sure you did at least once,” Castiel says softly.
Dean plops down next to him, on his knees, heels touching his behind. Slightly hunched, he takes Castiel’s hands into his. Makes him look at Dean. “The only person I’ve ever cared about was Sam. Pleasure, to an extent. I couldn’t give less of a fuck about the Brothel, or Rathi.”

“Not even Aaron?” Castiel asks quietly.

Dean’s eyes narrow, but there’s no anger. Only genuine surprise. “How the hell did you find out about Aaron?”

Castiel’s fingers clutch at Dean’s. He’s afraid he’ll run away, once he finds out he’s about to make a deal with Pleasure. “Sam,” he lies.

Dean nods, pursing his lips. “No. Not even him.”

Castiel gives him enough time to breathe, to think about what he’s going to say. Dean’s closed his eyes to the world, with a wonderfully calm expression Castiel hasn’t seen in a long time.

Then, Dean starts talking.

“I guess I’ve kept this for too long. Sam’s not really my brother. At least not in the sense of blood. He’s the son of a very wealthy Brothel girl, who died the day I found him thrown out into the stables. Crowley left him there to die. I’ve never told this to anyone before, but I swear to Gods, I don’t remember anything before I heard him screaming in a pile of hay.”

Castiel’s eyes widen, but with a squeeze from Dean, he stays silent.

“Pleasure found me and Sam,” Dean continues. “Demanded that Crowley take us in. I never looked back, because I knew Sam needed me. Pleasure landed us with a debt to Crowley, but at least we had a roof over our heads. They couldn’t sell me because of the marks, but decided Sam was worth keeping until he turned sixteen. Whenever Pleasure was around, we got more work. Our debt kept getting smaller. But not small enough for me to pay for both of us. Then, came the Dragossi egg deal. Then, came the realization I care for more people than I initially thought.

“Claws was the first one to show me that it’s worth caring. Then, Benny and his food. Charlie, with her late-night stories of the past, and her reading lessons. Samandriel, for always having my back. And,” Dean takes a breath. “You. For teaching me responsibility. And, um.”

Dean stumbles on words. Castiel feel like he’s elevated, with Dean’s hands in his. His heart doesn’t stop thundering, the reflection of gems playing on their linen clothing.

Cursing, Dean sits down even more comfortably, never letting Castiel’s hands go. He clears his throat, and says, “If I’m worthy of the sword - If I’m the lost Winchester child - I’ll do it. I’m fucking scared of taking responsibility for a whole country, but I’ll do it for all of you. It’s worth it, just so I can keep you safe.”

Castiel’s trembling fingers brush Dean’s cheek, then his lips. There’s a tension in the air that isn’t suffocating. The decision rings in Castiel’s ears, mind going at a million miles per second. Pleasure’s voice keeps telling him that all Dean’s ever needed is him. Castiel. A person who can make a decision for him. Take the responsibility away. So Castiel watches Dean’s lips as he talks, hearing how Dean’s agreeing to be King, but barely listening. Gradually, he gets closer. He can feel Dean’s breath on him, those green eyes are so concentrated on him, Castiel can see the touches they’ve shared are real, they weren’t just a fabrication of his own mind. Dean shuts the fuck up, as Castiel breathes in through his nose. Closes his eyes. Their lips are touching ever so lightly, no taste or feeling just yet, except for sweet torture.
Dean’s surprised quiet is enough to tell Castiel that this is okay. He presses forward, capturing Dean’s bottom lip in between his. It feels nothing what like he imagined in the cold mornings, alone in bed, with just his hands to keep him company. Nothing even close to how Dean wraps his arms around him, how he kisses back with carefully thought out movement.

Castiel used to imagine Dean as a timid kisser. He wasn’t prepared for Dean’s hands slowly creeping up his arms, and staying at the nape of his neck, cupping his face. Castiel moves, fitting right into Dean, as Dean places both of his legs around Castiel’s waist, sitting in between Castiel’s open ones. It’s so incredibly warm, Castiel sighs into the kiss, and then fits their foreheads together, noses touching.

Shaking breaths, barely-controlled smiles, all of this feels so right, Castiel forgets they’re at the Keep. It’s as if they’re underwater again, in each other’s arms, searching for a way out of this mess together. Dean’s thumb brushes circles along Castiel’s jaw. Castiel leans in, steals another kiss, not exploring anymore, just kissing for the intimate act of having Dean’s skin against his skin. Dean kisses back just as enthusiastically, and Castiel can feel his smile on his lips.

Once Dean leans back, their eyes meet. They’ve been looking at each other for so long, but never like this. Never like they’ve known all this time how this was going to end.

“I’d like you to find the sword with me,” Dean says, eyes soft.


***

They decide to go to the lake after Dean’s dinner with Michael, and bring Claws with them. Dean takes some Dragossi teeth dust, which he pockets after kissing the hell out of Castiel. He’s still slightly red in the cheeks, lips freshly kissed. Dean brushes his hair back, fixes his collar, and enters Michael’s chambers with confidence.

He greets Michael, as always, sits down in front of him, the small table making Dean feel distraught. He wishes they could sit further away from each other. Michael’s dressed with more garments than usual, decorated with blinding diamonds, pearls. A single ruby, on his collar.

“You look excited about something,” Michael says, grinning cunningly. “Do tell me.”

Dean curses him with all the swear words he knows inside of his head. He forces a smile. “We have made progress with Darkness,” he says. “She is responding beautifully to some of the commands.”

Michael hums. A servant refills his wine cup, which he downs, and dismisses her before she can ask him if he wants more. They’re completely alone now. Dean doesn’t show how unsettling all of this is. “That’s not it,” he says, eyes fixated on Dean. Dean stares at him without fear, thoughts concentrated on Castiel and his touch. “It’s as if you’ve been running, or engaged in physical activity. Surely, Castiel hasn’t been making you run around doing errands, has he?”

“No,” Dean answers a little too quick. “No, I was just hurrying to get here, your Highness.”

This answer seems to satisfy Michael. The predatory look on his face makes Dean want to throw a fork in between his eyes.
They make small talk about Claws, then Dean gives him a report of his daily chores, and a complete fucking lie about his correspondence with Salitia. Michael’s leg touches Dean’s, making him tense up, but nothing else happens.

“Castiel and I are thinking of letting Darkness fly tonight,” Dean says. To further calm down Michael’s suspicion, he continues, “We are making sure she’s not going to be seen, so we’d be flying over the forest.”

Michael doesn’t stop eating, pulling small bites of roasted pork from his fork with his teeth. The sound of teeth scraping against the metal is driving Dean insane. He says, “Is Castiel riding with you?”

Dean clears his throat. “Yes, your Highness. He’s a skilled rider -”

“Surely,” Michael interrupts him, malice in his voice. “You understand Castiel shouldn’t touch my Darkness.”

“What?” Dean says, removing his leg from Michael’s side. “I’m sorry, your Highness, but Castiel is a capable Master, he is taking care of her when I have chores.”

Michael’s sneer becomes evident with each passing second. “I believe you are forgetting who you’re talking to, Evia. Do be respectful.”

Dean hasn’t raised his voice yet. ‘I’ve shown you nothing but respect. I’m finding it hard to believe you’re refusing to give the same respect to the man who handles all of your horde of Dragossi.”

Michael’s rising anger doesn’t make Dean budge. He knows he can handle him. And Michael knows there’s no other person to handle the Red Ruby. Michael stands a little, and drags his chair next to Dean, making the hair on his arms stand up, skin goose-bumping with all the wrong he’s feeling. Michael takes Dean’s hand in his, and noses against Dean’s neck, his breath disgustingly vile. Dean fights the need to punch him. “Have I ever told you about why Castiel’s been denounced as Prince?”

“No, your Highness,” Dean says through clenched teeth.

Michael’s dangerous silence ends, when he starts speaking, voice low. “After John Winchester died, his Master, Robert Singer, had done everything to maintain a good relationship between me and my dragons. He hadn’t let any of the dragons out of his site, nor did he experiment on them for his own purposes. I had trusted Castiel to learn under his wing, but see, young Castiel had more plans than I’ve ever imagined. Did you know he lost my Storm Dragossi?”

Dean’s eyes widen. “Didn’t he bond with one?”

Michael chuckles, but it doesn’t sound amused. His fingers brush over Dean’s back, making his muscles tense. “Oh no,” Michael says. “He let it go. Since the day he allegedly told everyone he had bonded with the Dragossi, sent out the official documentation to other Masters, I haven’t seen the Dragossi. My Storm had gone. My perfect warrior. Do you understand now, Dean? Why I don’t want him to treat my fucking dragons?”

“He’s recovered the Red Ruby,” Dean says, defending. “He’s done everything to not betray your trust.”

“That’s why I have you under my roof. To keep him intact. Have you seen how he looks at you? Like you’ve created starlight for him,” Michael says, and kisses the side of Dean’s neck.
Dean goes rigid, and recoils, grabbing at his neck. A second passes, and Michael wraps his arms around Dean, whispering, “One day, when we’re truly alone, Evia, I’d like us to see what can become of this.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean manages out, screaming in his own head. “It’s just Salitians -”

“I won’t hear the same reason twice,” Michael’s annoyed voice rings out. “Well then, I should arrange for a quiet getaway for the both of us.”

Michael doesn’t say it like it’s a question. He says it like it’s a fucking statement. As if Dean belongs to him. As Michael buries his face into Dean’s neck, Dean maneuvers his free hand with the vial, dropping a significant amount of Dragossi teeth dust into Michael’s wine. Enough to make him sleep like the dead through the night.

Dean closes his eyes to the world, feeling himself breathe. “Yes, your Highness,” he says.

Michael takes it as submission. He doesn’t lay his hands on Dean again, but there’s still that underlying feeling of something disastrous coming. Michael dismisses him, explaining that he’s tired and stares after Dean the whole way. Dean doesn’t meet his eyes, even if he knows Michael’s craving the validation of Dean’s attention.

Dean knows he should go down to the Dungeons, meet Cas and go retrieve the sword. But his feet carry him toward the Archives. Sam meets him, still fuming. Charlie’s nowhere to be seen.

They sit down in the middle of the Archives, surrounded by old books and scrolls. The smell of old paper fills all of Dean’s senses, he remembers how easy they had it in the Brothels. He’s still closed off from Claws, but figures she’ll think he’s spending more time with Michael than usual.

Sam has his arms crossed on his chest.

“I guess I owe you an explanation.”

“No fucking shit,” Sam says, rolling his eyes.

“I’m sorry I’ve been keeping you in the dark,” Dean says, wincing at Sam’s cold stare. “Cas and I, we’re just tryin’ to protect you.”

“From what?” Sam hisses, then looks around, and leans into Dean, voice low enough for only Dean to hear. “If you think I didn’t do research on the sword and the last time it was seen, you’re wrong.”

“Yeah? What did you find?”

Sam crosses his legs, looking awfully grown-up among the shelves. “The sword belonged to Mary Winchester, right? The late Queen of Jarsaki?”

Dean clears his throat.

Sam tells him to wait, hurrying down the Archives, his steps fading into the distance. Dean waits, then, fingers clasped together, head lowered. He tries not to think about Michael, but the touches haunt him against his will. If Michael ever tries to take the next step, if he places a finger on Dean, Dean’s going to punch him, King or not. Then again, what if Dean finds the sword?

Who’s going to be King then?

Sam comes back with a map, an old, ratty parchment, with holes made by mice, and bugs. He places
the map on the ground carefully, using other books on the edges to keep it unfolded.

Pointing at the Keep, Sam says, “This has been around since the Calamity. The Keep’s Giant, according to some of the diaries I’ve found, had come to Jarsaki to help the people against the Emperor of Nether, attending a meeting they’d arranged, pleading peace. That was their first mistake,” the sadness in Sam’s voice is heart-wrecking. “The Emperor’s plan was to turn them to stone so they’d fall on top of Patheo. Some of them did, which made Rathi,” Sam points at the village they’ve lived in, “the slums, and the forest.”

Dean doesn’t peel his eyes away from the forest. The exact same place he almost drowned is where Sam’s finger rests on the map. His throat gets tighter.

Sam continues, “The other thirteen Giants, which made up a council, stand where they stood that day. Patheo architects keep repairing them each year, but the stone of their legs gets thinner every winter. Even the old Jarsaki were afraid of this happening. But this is exactly where I found out about the sword and figured how Mary played out in this. I’ve found her diary.”

For the longest single second, Dean’s thoughts flash in a whirl of confused memories. Sam’s extending a dog-eared hand-written book, filled to the brim with loose paper, drawings of creatures, love letters, and stories. He sees a slender hand gripping a feather, dipped in red berry ink, a smile, a quiet song. Blonde, shoulder length hair. The smell of apples, butter crust, with just a hint of lemon. Of strong, calloused hands, dark hair, and a strict, but warm voice, too. Dean has the book in his hands and doesn’t hear when Sam asks him why he’s crying. He comes back out of his trance, feeling the tears dry on his cheeks, Sam sits there worriedly gripping Dean’s forearm.

“Dean,” Sam says, softly. “Are you okay?”

Dean quickly wipes off the tears with the back of his hand, inhales sharply through his nose, and says, “Yeah. Yeah, I’m alright. Tell me… tell me about the sword.”

Sam pauses, but seeing Dean’s pleading eyes, he opens up Mary Winchester’s book, marked by a leather strap. “She’d seen the sword twice in her life. The first when Samuel Campbell started the war, and the second,” Sam says, looking Dean into the eye. “In the hands of her son. Dean.”

It doesn’t register. Dean listens, but doesn’t understand at first. Gradually, his mind catches up with what he’s hearing, his heart pulses in waves. He nearly drops the book. “What?”

Sam’s still staring at Dean, unbothered. “She named him after her grandmother, Deanna. Almost no one knows this, but the diary has been hidden for years. Only John and Mary knew their child’s name, as per royal tradition. No one was supposed to know until the child turned ten.”

Dean’s silent, gaping.

Sam just shrugs. “I’m not stupid,” he says. “I knew we weren’t blood brothers. But if it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t have survived. You raised me better than anyone ever could have. I don’t care if you’re the Lost Boy of Jarsaki, because to me - you’re always going to be my brother. Not by blood, but by heart.” Sam taps his chest.

Dean wraps Sam in his arms, letting Sam fit into his embrace like they’ve always been used to. Sam grips Dean’s shirt in between his fingers, holding onto him.

Dean says, murmuring, “I still don’t know if I’m the True King.”

“Let the sword tell you,” Sam whispers. “If you are, I’ll follow you to the edge of this earth.”
Dean laughs. “Wouldn’t you follow me anyway?”

“Shut up.”

They stay like this for a short while, and the book feels heavy on Dean’s knees. He wants to read it through, feel the paper beneath his fingertips, see her writing again. The memories are so vivid now. Dean can even hear her voice, clear words of the song flow in his mind until he lifts his head from Sam’s shoulder, and sees Charlie, leaning against the frame.

She looks more alive, the shadows on her skin covered by a thick layer of paint. Sam winces, as if he’s done something wrong. Charlie just waves her hand nonchalantly. “I told him not to dig through the diaries,” she says apologetically. “Michael’s been searching for the name of the child for years. Can’t believe it took a 16 year old to fish out the greatest proof of an Heir in a few months.”

Sam shrugs. “He’s not very good at searching, then.”

“I think he just doesn’t like me looming over his shoulder,” Charlie says. Moving forward, she sits next to the brothers, holding out her hands for Mary Winchester’s diary. Dean gives it to her, fingers shaking. She sighs. “I wish you would’ve seen her when she was alive. She loved you more than she did John.”

Dean holds his breath, eyes wide, eyebrows up. “You knew. You knew who I was?”

Charlie nods. “I couldn’t tell you,” she says, pouting. “The day Mary and John died… I think they knew what was coming. Before the Novak Lords attacked the Keep, Mary came here with you, gave me her diary, and knifed me a strand of her hair. Royal hair binds you, and since I’m already bound to the Archives, the newer bond attached to the secrecy of the Archive information. Sam’s still not bound, which is why I was hoping he wouldn’t find out about the diary.”

“Why didn’t you want us to know?” Sam asks, sceptical.

Charlie closes her eyes. “Because - because I promised Mary I’d never reveal Dean’s name to anyone. That I’d protect him, even if it meant Michael would reign. The promise I made was far more important than any bind on my soul. But here we are. The cat’s out of the bag.”

Dean doesn’t want to believe it. Even if he remembers Mary, and John, he doesn’t want to find out if the sword calls back to him. He’s awfully silent.

Charlie says, placing her hand on top of Dean’s, comforting, “I’ll tell you everything, once you’ve got the proof we need to convince the Lords you’re the True King. I’ve met your parents. I’ve met you, when you were a kid. I’ll help you remember.”

Dean pulls his hand out, standing up. His heart is racing. Closing his eyes, Dean says, forced, “They’re not my parents. I’m still not the King. And I’d rather not remember. My family’s already here, why the fuck do I have to dwell on the past?”

He avoids Mary’s diary, doesn’t answer Sam, and goes. Straight to Castiel. If he’s the King, he’ll be King. To protect them. But he’s not going to be the Lost Boy, because for once, he is not lost.

***
Castiel’s dressed in most of his riding gear, and he’s getting all of the orbs he has stashed on top of his work table in the Dungeon when Dean storms inside, the red curtain flying open.

“Where have you bee-” Castiel doesn’t get much of a word in when Dean steps into his space, cupping Castiel’s jaw, and kisses him.

The air out of Castiel’s lungs gets punched out, but the enthusiasm gets to him. The kisses are open mouthed, messy, Dean fits right into him, and all Castiel can do is kiss back, wrapping him up in his arms.

The urgency is insanely high, Dean snakes his fingers under Castiel’s linen shirt, the pads of his fingers touching skin, making Castiel hum into Dean’s mouth. Suddenly, he’s pressed into the wall. With shaking hands, Castiel drags his touch down Dean’s back, enjoying how his muscles react to him. Dean presses his hips into Castiel’s, Dean’s hardness evident.

“Fuck,” Dean murmurs into Castiel’s mouth. “I’m so fucking angry.”

Castiel grinds into him, when Dean takes both of his hands into his, slamming them over his head into the stone wall. Biting Dean’s lip, Castiel fits his forehead against Dean’s, eyes closed. He hisses, “What did he do to you?”

Dean places kisses on Castiel’s jaw, moving his hips forward. Pleasure sparks through Castiel, but he’s concentrated when Dean says, “Not because of Michael. I’m angry at myself for shaking off responsibility when I’ve got so many people to take care of. The way all of you take care of me. Gods, you smell so good.”

“Dean,” Castiel groans. Dean’s hand goes in between them both, brushing against Castiel’s hard line. “As much as I - fuck - as much as I want this, you, this is not the time-”

Dean kisses Castiel, and gradually moves away, still close enough for their lips to touch, but not close enough for Castiel’s need for satisfaction. “You’re right,” Dean breathes heavily. “I hate this, but you’re right.”

They kiss for a few more moments, coming down from the delicious high. Castiel wants nothing more than to have Dean here, on his table, but Dean’s already brushing his own lips with his thumb, the other placed firmly on his hips. “I’m sorry, it’s just-”

“-yeah,” Dean says, the anger gone from his eyes. “I should be apologizing, not you. This is way out of line for a - a King. Kinda King.”

Castiel tugs at Dean’s shirt, making Dean look into his eyes. “I’d very much like it if I could see you in my bed, Your Majesty,” Castiel says, half-laughing, half-serious. He sees how hard this is to accept for Dean. Castiel leans in, his mouth against Dean’s ear. “I’d like to watch you while I kneel in front of you.”

Dean inhales sharply.

Castiel takes his armor from the ground, and gets it on himself. “Go dress. Get everything you need for a few days, I’m not sure how long it’ll take for us to get back here, if ever.”

“What about Sam?”

“Charlie will protect him. I’ve provided her with a refuge location where she will send him with someone trustworthy, if needed.”
Dean disappears through the storage door, and when Samandriel enters the area, Castiel sits in front of the table, placing down a huge bag filled with books.

Samandriel narrows his eyes. “What’s going on?”

“I’m releasing you from the bind,” Castiel says, matter of factly.

Samandriel nearly falls down, but Dean reappears, stopping in his tracks.

“You can’t do that!” Samandriel says, his hands slamming on the table. “You promised.”

“And I’ve protected you throughout the years,” Castiel says. “I want you to prepare every Dragossi in the Keep, because according to my calculations, in a few hours all hell’s going to break loose. I need you to grab them, and go. Just as we planned.”

“Why?” Samandriel asks, with a sneer.

Castiel breathes in. Dean stands where he is, wildly confused. “The True King is coming,” he says, slowly. Then, he raises his eyes to meet Samandriel’s. “We’ll need a storm to cover our tracks.”

Samandriel curses under his breath. “Your tracks? You’ve found the Lost Boy, haven’t you? Do you know what’ll happen to me if the True King doesn’t push Michael over the fucking Keep? Castiel,” he says, hands clasped in front of him, pointing at Cas. “This is all of our lives on the line. The Dragossi, me, you, Dean-”

Castiel winces when Samandriel mentions Dean. So Samandriel stops. Thinks. His face slowly changes from red, to paper white. With wide eyes, he turns to Dean, mouth open as if he’s just about to say something.

Castiel clears his throat. “Please, Samandriel. Our bond will break once he has the sword. I need you to do this for me, and run with them all. I’ve got contacts in Fean, where Michael won’t be able to touch you.”

“Oh,” Samandriel spits out. “And I’ll just fucking leave you here? With Michael?”

“Yes,” Castiel says coldly. “We’re risking everything, and the Dragossi need a skilled Master to take care of them while I’m gone.”

“I’m not a fucking Master,” Samandriel says.

“You’re something even better,” Castiel says, softly. “You’re the leader they need.”

Dean opens his mouth, and shuts it. Castiel’s still looking at Samandriel, who refuses to meet his eye.


As he leaves, Castiel catches his arm, stopping him in his tracks. Exhaling through his nose, eyes closed, Castiel says, “Pleasure wants you for this to work. We’ll see each other again.”

Samandriel looks on forward. “Pleasure already has me.”

After Samandriel’s gone, Dean looks at Castiel with narrowed eyes. “I’ve got a million questions.”

Castiel is visibly distraught, and says, “I’ll give you the answers you need once we have the sword. Please get Claws out of her nest. I have to say good-bye to all of my Dragossi.”
Dean walks over, and laces their fingers together. “It’s not the last time you’re going to see them,” he promises. “We can travel to Fean, after all of this.”

Castiel gives him a smile. “Yes. We could meet Prince Kjell and his newborn sister. I think you’d like them.”

Dean kisses him, ever so lightly. “Let’s go, before I rip my hair out.”
Claws easily lets both of them climb on top of her, nuzzling her head into Dean’s outstretched hand when Castiel settles on the harness. He looks magnificent like this, and Dean would like to kiss him while he's in the saddle, but he refrains from doing so. He gives Claws a bag of red rubies, which she eagerly crunches on, and climbs in front of Castiel.
Castiel fits his hands around Dean’s torso, fingers lightly gripping.

Samandriel stands on the side, fingers turned to fists. He’s absolutely livid, his eyes are full of storm and clouds, reminding Dean of those days when he stood in the rain, forgetting about all of his problems. He can’t do that anymore. Nothing about Samandriel’s storm feels relaxing when he stands his ground like this. All of those jokes about the weather, Samandriel’s freedom whenever a storm came around in Jarsaki, everything makes sense. The smile he sends Samandriel’s way is sad.

Samandriel drags a finger down his nose, lips, and chin, greeting the True King. Dean still doesn’t
feel like he deserves it. For all he knows, the sword and the corals might not even exist.

“Be safe,” Castiel bids.

Samandriel ignores Castiel completely, still looking at Dean. “You keep him alive. I’ll try to hold Michael off for as long as I can.”

“Michael’s sleeping,” Dean says, drumming his fingers on the saddle. “We should be okay for the whole night.”

Samandriel breathes in deeply. “Gordon isn’t.”

“Shit,” Castiel says.

“Go,” Samandriel orders. “Before he notices you’re gone.”

Claws understands Samandriel clearly, so they take off, leaving Samandriel standing there, and all of the Dragossi gather around him, staring at them go away. Jarra growls, her sad eyes boring into Castiel’s, but she doesn’t go after them, understanding the importance of the situation. Approaching the waterfall, Dean uses one of the alchemical orbs he made himself, and with the help of Claws’ tail, the sand wall appears, as solid as the one Castiel showed him a few times. Castiel squeezes Dean’s torso in celebration it worked.

The night sky of Patheo is breathtaking. A night like this shouldn’t be spent hunting for a legendary sword, Dean thinks. He would much rather spend it with Castiel, side by side. Castiel feels Dean’s nerves rising up, so he hugs him closer, the heat of his body providing enough warmth for Dean to feel safe. Claws is sending him warmth as well, her childish charm gone for the time being. She’s as serious as both of them, her lithe body shining in the starlight.

Dean has never seen the forest from up high. It’s scary enough to fly, but he trusts Claws and Castiel enough to save him from falling, if it comes to it. The shadows of the forest scare him less than the flight. Claws shares what she’s feeling from below, the pulsing life filled with ancient magic, with the whispers of the immortal creatures in hiding. All Dragossi fear getting dragged down by the invisible hands of the unknown, but Claws is fearless, going down through the trees, wings protecting Dean and Cas from the sap on the trees.

They reach the lake in a few minutes, Claws doesn’t hurry at all. Castiel climbs down first, checking if the coast is clear, a sword in his hand. He’s cautious, head bent, silently waiting for any sign of danger. Claws lets out an encouraging rumble out of her throat, pushing Castiel forward with her nose. The lake is as blue as the last time they were here, the surface so still it looks like a mirror, with the trees losing their color, all of that red and auburn seeping away with the change of seasons. Dean can’t believe it’s almost been a year since he stole Claws out of her nest. Almost a year with Castiel by his side. Dean climbs down, joining Castiel on the ground, the moss underneath their feet a cold embrace. They breathe in heavily, eyes wide Dean finds Castiel’s hand, wrapping their fingers together.

Claws seems to remember the lake too, because she flies through the trees, over the lake, stopping in the middle. Her strong wings cause ripples on the surface, disrupting the mirror-like calmness. Dean looks over at Castiel.

This is it. The moment of truth.

“I’ll take watch,” Castiel says. “Go in. If anything happens, I’ll come save you.”

“Or,” Dean says, nervously looking at Castiel as if it’s the last time he’s seeing his face. “I’ll save
you. Depends on the point of view.”

Castiel smiles, that closed-lip shy one Dean likes the most. With this, Dean starts undressing.

Castiel waits for him to drop down the last of his clothing, leaving Dean in only his undergarments. His marks are in full view, but Dean doesn’t feel self-conscious. The marks look darker in the blue light of the lake, embossing Dean’s confident posture, leaving him vulnerable. The way Castiel is looking at him is everything; those blue eyes are fixated on Dean like he’s the most precious gem in the entire universe. Castiel moves in, kissing Dean with practiced ease, the fervor from before burning brightly, but still subdued. “Don’t drown, you fool,” he murmurs.

“I won’t,” Dean promises, and turns to the lake. Autumn doesn’t take pity, because Dean is already shivering before his toes touch the warm surface. Claws watches him from the middle, her scales mixing with the blue and red. Dean looks at himself through her eyes, and sees a strong man, with the posture of a King with nervous eyes. If his dreams weren’t lying, Dean will find more than the sword down there.

It’s alright, Claws sends a message through the bond, I will protect you.

He knows how to deal with wild Dragossi. The trick is to treat them with respect and equality. And give them red meat. Which he doesn’t have on him.

He can’t see more than the corals on the bottom of the lake, growing on bright colored sand. Dean mentally prepares himself for the feeling of drowning, fingers already frozen from rising anxiety and the cold creeping up his veins. It’s comforting to know Castiel’s right behind him, and Claws is up front.

As he’s about to jump in, an arrow flies past him, grazing Dean’s back. He feels searing pain, and screams out, grabbing at his shoulder, feeling hot blood pour onto his fingers. He hears Castiel shout his name, like a faint whisper.

On his right, he sees Gordon, and a few of his other goons, all wearing black leather, and with swords in their hands. Only Gordon holds an arbalet full of arrows.

“I knew it!” Gordon shouts. “I knew you two were plotting something against King Michael. You stole all of the Dragossi from the Keep, you filthy mutts! By the name of the King, you are under arrest-”

He doesn’t finish his sentence, because Castiel throws one of the orbs at Gordon in half a circle, moving his sword so that the tip hits the fragile glass, the orb creates a dark mist. It’s hard to see, so before Castiel becomes engulfed as well, he screams, “Go! Go now!”

Claws flies over Dean’s head, and joins the fight, her fire building up in her throat. She urges Dean on through the bond, showing pictures of the lake rapidly. The ground shakes, suddenly, the light coming from the sky disappears. Dean hears the oncoming storm, feels it to the tips of his hair. Gods, Samandriel is free.

With newfound energy, Dean jumps into the warmth. Water hugs him, and bubbles of air escape his lungs and nose, when he sees lightning strike the trees in the far distance. It’s so unbelievably pleasant, that he doesn’t notice how yellow, red, blue eyes open up all around him, staring at the commotion they are not used to. Their scales less sharp than the ones at the Keep, worn down from the wilderness, the water softening their fire. Dean stops short, flailing in the water, a scream threatening to exit through his mouth.
The Dragossi do the same thing as they did in Dean’s dream; they look down, down at the bottom, where, to Dean’s astonishment, two stone eyes meet his, peeking through the corals. They’re so *colorful*, which is strangely similar to that one night with Castiel, The Roadhouse, and Castiel’s callouses on his fingers.

Dean swims down, ignoring how all of the Dragossi follow his movement with their vicious eyes. They don’t cross his path, nor do they move from their nests. Dean realizes the corals grow in perfect circles around the Dragossi, serving as their own private homes. It’s easier than before, he’s practiced enough during his dreams. He reaches the stone Head, and there’s still plenty of air in his lungs. It doesn’t feel as if he’s been here long. The eyes do not follow, though. They stay dead.

It takes a second for Dean to find the sword, hidden by years and years of corals climbing up the stone, encasing the sword within their colorful tendrils. The sword glimmers in the water, stuck in the middle of the Giant’s forehead. Dean swims in front of it, slowly extending his hand toward his goal, reaching, like did all of those times during his dream.

A hand joins his, white as snow, so stark in comparison to Dean’s freckled skin. She’s dressed in white, her hair flows in the water, and she’s so beautiful it hurts. Dean wants to talk to her, as she talked to him in his dreams, but she just shakes her head, and says, as if the water is nothing to her. “Dean,” she coos. “I’ve waited for so long for you to have it.”

Her blonde hair flows in front of her face, hiding her green eyes from view. Dean wants to thank her, but no words come out of his mouth. She points down at the sword, which waits patiently.

“Go on,” she says, “This isn’t a dream anymore, sweetheart. Take the sword and save all of us.”

The urge to talk to her fades, so Dean swims down, wraps his fingers around the handle, mentally getting ready for everything that comes after he’s got the sword in his hands. Happy that he’s been training for a year for this, he pulls, anticipating some straining.

But the sword comes out easily, inch by inch. With Dean taking it out, the water ripples, causing all of the Dragossi around him to float away in a lazy swirl. Dean practically screams inside of his head when the sword comes out, and the ripple turns into thunder and an earthquake, shaking the whole lake. He can feel the rain pouring down on the surface, the sound reaching his ears through Claws.

Staring up, he doesn’t see anything, feel anything, or hear anything. In a split second, he catches an image of Claws thrashing against the bond, then calling out to him with heartbreaking sobs. The bond goes painfully, devastatingly quiet.

The Lady of the Lake is gone, and he’s holding the sword, but Claws is silent. He can’t feel her anymore.

Dean swims up as fast as he can, breaching the surface of the water, his whole body shakes, and terrified tears gather in his eyes. He screams, water pouring down his throat, he’s choking with her name on his tongue, “Claws!”

Most of the Guards are on the sand, lifeless. Castiel’s crawling toward the body of Claws, who is alive.

Where’s the bond? Where has it gone?

“Claws,” Dean manages out weakly. The sword is still in his hand, and Castiel reaches for him, mouthing something. There’s blood coming down his forehead. Dean’s worst fear stares back at him...
while Gordon is standing, laughing at the chaos. Half of his armor is burnt, his hands are bloody, and he holds an alchemical orb inside of his palm. He looks straight Dean into the eye. Then says, loudly, “You pathetic, whiny piece of shit. You think getting the fucking sword will help you become King, now? Guess again, Dean from the Rathi village.”

He smashes the orb on Claws. Dean’s heart and soul sinks as he sees Claws thrash in the cage, the violet tendrils closing in on her rapidly. Castiel can’t move, and everything is crumbling all over him, the dream provides no comfort and there’s no warmth in his stomach, no red line to tell him everything will be okay. Dean swims as fast as he can to reach Claws and Castiel, to save them all, but Gordon is already reaching for his own black-cast sword, and Dean can see it’s going to come down on Castiel.

Castiel’s fingers seem so far away. Dean’s heart is breaking a million times, and the sword burns in his hands…

Before Gordon’s sword smashes down on Castiel, there’s a blinding light to the left, and Pleasure appears out of nowhere, practically naked, save for the skirt that covers his hooves. He claps his hands together, creating a barrier between Gordon and Castiel, so Gordon’s sword hits the glass and sends him back stumbling. Dean crawls out of the lake, reaching for Castiel, and just as he’s about to try and save Claws, Pleasure puts a hand on his shoulder, and chants something in his own language, and old tongue Dean can’t quite place.

The light returns, Pleasure’s burning eyes bear into Gordon’s, who smiles triumphantly, even if he can’t touch them. Claws whines, her throat unable to provide any heat. Claws meets Dean’s eyes, and with a final, crushing blink of an eye, she lets him go.

It takes another eyeblink for them to be gone from the lake. The bond is still quiet when Dean crashes onto the ground, with sand beneath his fingers, and inside of his mouth. He coughs, the cold getting worse with the wind blowing from the waves behind him. Castiel lies next to him, with a bloody mouth and nose, unconscious. Dean crawls over him, cradling Castiel’s face in his shaking fingers.

“Wake up,” Dean cries out, almost whispering with his sore throat. “Please, I’m begging you, wake up.”

Cold hands drag Dean away from Castiel, and he screams, scrambling to get out of the grip. The glitter stops him, and Pleasure’s face comes into view.

“Calm the fuck down,” he says. “He’s going to live.”

Dean grabs some sand in his hands, and throws it angrily at Pleasure. His anger drives him further, and he yells loudly, tripping over his feet while trying to ram into Pleasure. Pleasure simply snaps his fingers, making Dean freeze in place, and his body falls down on the sand. He’s still huffing, cursing Pleasure with every bad word he knows in every language.

“What’s wrong with you?” Pleasure hisses. “I just saved both of you from death, you gods-damned idiot. You should be falling at my feet, praying to me, thanking me.”

Dean finds his vocal cords still work, even if his face is smashed into the sand. “I could’ve saved Claws. Our Bond is fucking gone, and because of you, I can’t fucking save her. She’s gone, Pleasure! She’s gone.”

Pleasure doesn’t say anything, just gathers Castiel in his arms, staining his glittering skirt. Pleasure’s hooves leave prints in the sand, and Dean feels his limbs gaining movement. He punches the sand,
screaming at it. The frustration is so high, that he tries searching for the red line inside of his chest. There’s nothing.

There’s the painful nothing. Absolutely nothing calls back to him.

Dean cries out in pain, sitting on his knees, fingers balled up to fists. His muscles strain along with his pain, but Dean doesn’t stop crying. Sobbing. It’s as painful as thinking about Castiel in Pleasure’s arms, or Sam, who is still there in the Keep, surrounded by enemies. The sword lies in the sand, a few feet away from Dean.

Trying to gather himself up, Dean raises his eyes to the sea, and sees two Giants standing in the water up to their knees, holding hands. In a state of disarray, Dean looks around himself, breathing heavily. There’s a beautiful palace behind him; a forest surrounds the area, hiding them from view. Dean gets up, slowly, yet surely. He follows Pleasure, with fire burning in his throat.

He has to know if Castiel is okay.

And only after Castiel is breathing can he think about everything else. He can let the pain in.

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Pleasure sends Castiel into a deep sleep, asking the palace servants to take care of his healing. Castiel stays in a room with so much color that Dean’s eyes start hurting. So he leaves, going out into the terrace, where Pleasure waits, sitting with a feast put in front of him. Pleasure lazily gestures at the food, and the seat on the opposite side of the marble table.

“Eat,” he says. “You need your strength back.”

Dean sits down, but doesn’t grab a bite. “We have to go back.”

Pleasure raises an eyebrow, his eyes glinting with annoyance for a second. “Where? To Patheo?”

Dean leans on the table, pointing a shaking finger at Pleasure. “We need to get Sam. And Benny. Charlie. Anna. Claws. They’re going to die if we don’t go now.”

Pleasure snorts, puffing his cheeks out. “Michael can’t do anything to her. Benny, however, went under Michael’s spell for the sake of his and his wife’s survival. If you showed up now, Benny would murder you in cold blood. And then what? War? No, you stay here.”

Dean struggles to find an argument, so he says, weakly, “Anna?”
This time Pleasure looks him into the eye, slightly apologetic. “Anna is locked up. There is nothing we can do, but our only hope is that Michael won’t kill her. She is his healer, too valuable to damage.”

Dean stays silent, his fingers tapping against the marble. The never ending water and the waves provide no comfort, and Dean doesn’t even care that he’s seeing the sea for the first time of his life. He doesn’t want to be here. Wishes he could go back to the Keep, and never think about the sword, or the crown again.

Pleasure sighs, setting his food down on the already overflowing plate. “I’m not one to understand what you’re going through. I’ve lived through wars, the fucking Calamity, Michael killing your parents who were my friends, to an extent. It isn’t exactly easy for me to feel any kind of connection to people anymore, after they’ve abandoned me and my kind. But I assure you, you’re the change this country needs. You and Castiel have sparked a revolution. I’m only doing this for my own merit, just as I did when I took Sam and you off the street. Once you’re King, I’d like to discuss the future of the Green Devils in Jarsaki. That’s all I need from you. Castiel has already paid his price, now I need you to pay yours.”


Pleasure drinks a tall glass of wine. “He didn’t tell you? Uh oh.”

Dean sits back, thinking about all of those times Castiel went away to meet someone in Patheo. A spark of jealousy courses through his body. “Castiel met you, didn’t he? Multiple times.”

“Oh yes. In various taverns. Please don’t take it as an intimate relationship. He has voiced out his discomfort with being close to me numerous times. More than I deserve.”

The jealousy simmers down. Dean takes a sliced orange into his hand. “What did he ask of you?”

Pleasure smiles, looking out into the sea. “I think he will tell you himself. I don’t like snitching.”

“Fuck you,” Dean says, and gets up from his chair, making it fall on the ground abruptly. He storms back into the Palace, his steps showing all of his anger. Pleasure simply continues eating, enjoying the light breeze and the view.

***

There’s warmth all around him, and soft covers touch his overheated skin. Castiel groans, thinking he doesn’t want to get up - all of those chores waiting for him seem like a complete nuisance when it’s so comfortable in this bed. There’s a pleasant heaviness next to him. Castiel likes snuggling into the person next to him, their beating heart next to his ear.

It takes him a while to get out of his sleepy state, he lets his mind wander until he remembers bits and pieces. It has been years since he had someone with him in his bed, which means -

Castiel opens up his eyes. Dean is lying on the soft colored bed, with dirty clothes, and a solemn look on is face, thubming at the necklace on his chest. He notices Castiel is awake, brushes a hand down Castiel’s face, checking his wounds. Gods, he’s gorgeous.

There’s a little bit of pain in his nose area, but otherwise he feels okay. The way Dean touches him is
careful, loving, so Castiel closes his eyes against the sensation, moving closer to Dean.

“Did you get the sword?” Castiel mumbles into Dean’s shirt. Dean’s heart starts beating faster, to Castiel’s joy.

“I did,” Dean says, his voice raspy. There’s a pause. “How are you feeling?”

Castiel moves, bracing himself with his elbow, and looks at Dean. He remembers next to nothing about what happened after Pleasure stopped Gordon from killing him. Only Dean’s distressed call remains, etched into Castiel’s mind. “I’m okay. Haven’t slept this well for years. How long have you stayed here with me?”

Dean runs a hand down Castiel’s bicep, then leaves his fingers on Castiel’s skin. “A few hours.”

Castiel sees Dean’s eyes, sees the sadness, the worry, everything he hasn’t seen in a while. “Where are we? Did Pleasure take us here?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Dean says, kind of accusingly.

There’s a silence between them, even if Dean’s hand doesn’t leave Castiel’s arm. “I don’t know how we got here,” Castiel says, looking Dean straight into his green, green eyes. The light color of the room brings out more of Dean’s freckles. “I blacked out when Pleasure came to help us.”

Dean bites his lip, brows furrowed. He looks down at his own hand, his thumb brushing Castiel’s skin. “Heard a lot of weird things today. Seems like you know Pleasure more than you let on.”

“Oh,” Castiel says, heart dropping. “He told you.”

“And you were terrified when I told you Pleasure is a Green Devil. Isn’t he like your best friend now?”

“Dean,” Castiel says, grabbing Dean’s hand in his. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. You were stressed, and I couldn’t think of anything else. He knew you better than I did.”

Dean takes his hand out of Castiel’s, looking down at the light sheet. “You made a fucking contract with him.”

“I did.”

“So what did he ask of you? Your soul? Your arm? A year of your life?”

Castiel shakes his head. “He asked me for something I did not have full control of. For Samandriel.”

Dean’s furrowed brows show his instant confusion. “What the hell does he need Samandriel for?”

It takes a long pause for Castiel to think about how to tell Dean the whole story of Samandriel and him. He hasn’t told anyone in years, but Dean deserves to know. “I think you’ve gathered enough proof that Samandriel’s the Storm Dragossi.”

“Yeah.”

“Samandriel is older than all of us, he was born a few years after the Calamity. He’s the only surviving Storm Dragossi, his siblings have died during multiple wars. He was the only one against war, he helped people take care of their lands with constant storms.”

“Like the ones in Jarsaki? I used to stand outside in the warm rain whenever one of those weird
storms hit.”

“Oh yes, that was him,” Castiel explains. Dean’s anger is receding, there’s only a hint of annoyance left. Castiel becomes bolder, inching closer to him. Michael captured him ten years ago, when he was sick. Samandriel has never talked about the whole accident, and I do not want to bother his privacy. Under Michael’s spell, Samandriel flew over Jarsaki once in a while, causing storms so that Michael’s enemies couldn’t cross into Patheo.”

“I’ve heard about the raids around the city,” Dean says, thumb brushing Castiel’s skin. A fire simmers inside of Castiel’s chest. “Wondered why we weren’t fucked over.”

“Michael is smart, sometimes,” Castiel explains. He brushes his nose against Dean’s cheek. “But the Dungeons have a protective layer of magic, and Samandriel could sometimes try and communicate with me. We weren’t bonded, then, it was really hard to help him without understanding what he wanted to tell me. I asked Charlie for help with some scrolls, and eventually, found out how to induce a forced bond. Samandriel didn’t oppose this idea, and I couldn’t watch him crumple after Michael drained him every single time he flew on him. We bonded, against Michael’s will.”

“Michael told me you lost his Storm Dragossi,” Dean says.

“I didn’t, obviously,” Castiel says, shrugging. “Once we had the bond, I could talk to Samandriel. He was the one who showed me the ritual. I turned him human, and the Storm Dragossi was gone. Our Bond is - was - the only thing keeping Samandriel in human form.”

“Is he back to being a Dragossi?”

“Yes,” Castiel says, kissing Dean’s cheek. Dean shivers, to Castiel’s amusement. “He doesn’t belong to anyone now.”

“Except Pleasure,” Dean grumbles.

“Samandriel chose Pleasure as much as Pleasure chose him. I think their bond is going to be much stronger. My deal wasn’t Samandriel’s freedom. It was an agreement to help Pleasure bond with Samandriel. It’s a difficult process, and even Pleasure isn’t capable of knowing what to do. I didn’t promise him anything else, I swear.”

“Even after I told you who he really is, you trusted him. I don’t know how I feel about this.”

“Was I wrong about trusting him?”

“No, but -”

“Dean, are you jealous?”

Dean doesn’t even pause before kissing him. “Shut up. We have to go eat, Pleasure’s going to be waiting for us in the dining room.”

Castiel kisses him back, and makes Pleasure wait twenty minutes until they both go down the marble stairs. Castiel’s hair is a little ruffled, and Dean’s red in the cheeks. Pleasure smirks at them. “I take it you really like my Palace. Sit down, eat, and then we talk.”

***
“We will need time to get the Lords of Jarsaki to join our forces and drag Michael away from his throne. I have seen this happen once in my life, and I will see it again. Castiel has paid the price,” Pleasure says. His hooves are in full view now, confirming every single suspicion Dean has had over the months. “Nobody can see my Palace, and nobody can enter unless I reveal it myself. You are safe here.”

Castiel looks really different in this light, with his pastel colored clothes making his blue eyes shine brighter. “What will it take to convince the Lords to act for us?”

“This is where I cannot help,” Pleasure says. “I can bring them here without their consent, but I am unable to change their view on politics. You’re on your own for this.”

Dean snorts. “Then what good are you? I have no idea how to be a King, and you’re asking me to instantly deal with cross-land treaties and the Lords who probably despised the Winchesters?”

Pleasure smiles, popping a cherry in his mouth. “Oh they liked the Winchesters. What they do not like is trusting a man who is going to claim he’s the lost Winchester son.”

Castiel shrugs, grabbing a piece of smoked meat. “We have proof. Dean holds the Campbell sword. They won’t be able to lift it up if they’re not true royal blood. That should settle it.”

Dean stares at the food, but doesn’t eat at all. They’re sitting in a Hall full of bright colors, flowers, and nature out through the windows. A warm breeze comes from the terrace, with the curtains lazily floating in air, glittering like Pleasure’s skin. “When can we start?”

Pleasure’s keen eye meets Dean’s. “I am going to leave for a week. You two have to go to the Library I have here, and please, look up all of the districts of Jarsaki, learn about the Lords. You have to talk to them like you know them. Michael had more time deal with them, I put my trust in your ability to learn quick.”

Castiel puts a comforting hand on top of Dean’s. “I know some of them personally. Others might be tricky, but we can do this.”

A week to learn everything about the lands he’s supposed to rule. It hasn’t even been a month of him finding out he’s the true Winchester heir, and he’s already expected to know more than he could possible remember. Seven days.

Dean’s eyes are filled with fire when Pleasure leaves, and instead of eating, he drags Castiel to the Library and they start searching for books on the Lords, correspondence, letters, maps, official documents. Pleasure’s library is bigger than the Archives in the keep, and the information hidden in the crevices makes Dean thirst for knowledge. Pain stings his chest when he thinks about Sam and Charlie. They’d love to see all of these books, to read them, and to discuss them over a cup of tea.

Rubbing between his eyes, Dean sighs, an array of books scattered around him. So far, he’s been reading about the southern Lords, the women and men who are actively against war. Jarsaki is a torn country, some of the Lords have borders with Zhwai and Nethereal, which instantly makes them bloodthirsty. Other districts are calmer, with less war, but more culture.

Castiel peeks over Dean’s shoulder, and points at a few of the scrolls with invitations to Pleasure. “These Lords have thriving creature communities. Laume and Green Devils can roam around freely, and fear no repercussions. I have never been there, but I have heard their people are happy with their Lords decision.”
Dean bites his lip in thought. “Okay. They might be the easiest to convince, since we have Pleasure with us. Turns out he’s not as useless as I thought.”

“He saved our lives,” Castiel says.

“Don’t rub it in my face,” Dean says. “He made me leave Claws behind.”

“You couldn’t have done anything,” Castiel murmurs, sitting behind him, his chin on Dean’s shoulder. “Gordon used a cage, she probably severed the connection so that you wouldn’t get caught with her.”

“I wasn’t even near the fucking cage!”

“The cage would have pulled you in. The two of you had a connection of the soul, the cage would have recognized you as one,” Castiel says apologetically. “We’re going to get her back, Dean. That’s for certain. You have the sword, and soon, you will have the whole country behind your back. She’s too valuable to Michael, he won’t do anything harmful to her.”

Dean breathes out shakily, and leans his head against Castiel’s with his eyes closed and a frown. “I’m going to do anything in my power to save her from him.”

“I know,” Castiel kisses his cheek, and slowly backs away, taking another parchment into his hands. “We have to get ready. The Lords have no patience, and no spouses to level their heads. It’s really hard to keep them in line when all they do is argue with each other.”

“No spouses?”

“The Lord will step down from their position when they marry someone. That’s how your father, John, left his district and became King.”

“I wonder how they met,” Dean says.

“We can check the Archives once Michael is gone,” Castiel says, smiling. He hands the parchment to Dean. “I’ll pretend I’m one of the Lords. Try and talk me into bending the knee for you.”

Dean grins, for the first time today. “That wouldn’t be too hard, would it?”

“Dean,” Castiel says, with a laugh. “Now is not the time.”

“Whatever, killjoy,” Dean says.

***

Castiel watches Dean out through the window, how incredible he looks with a white robe they both found in one of the wardrobes in the Palace. Dean’s practicing with the Campbell sword, slashing into the air with beautiful practiced swings. The sword shines in the sunlight, sending rays in every direction when the light hits just right. Dean hasn’t even broken a sweat after thirty minutes of nervous preparation for the first Lord to arrive. Pleasure has sent a message through his magic, announcing that the first Lord will be Lord Uriel from the south. A difficult man with difficult morals.

As he arrives, Dean asks to meet in the terrace over the ocean, with the Giants in the sunlight. Castiel
figures it’s going to be easier to talk when Dean’s relaxed, with his head held high. In that moment, Dean resembles his mother the most, with his heart on his sleeve and a sword in hand.

Pleasure pops in with his magic, hand in hand with a Lord Castiel has seen exactly once in his life, right when Michael took the throne. Uriel’s age shows through his limp, his dark clothing looks old and wrinkly, but the cane in his hand has his insignia. He hasn’t married, and probably never will. Castiel can’t hear anything from here, he can only see the scene unfold. Pleasure leaves the two of them, and appears on Castiel’s side. His cat-like grace is eye catching, and Pleasure sits on the window sill with his back to the ocean.

“Do you think he’s going to be okay being there alone with him?” Castiel asks, putting his hand on the glass. His breath ghosts on the surface, making it fog.

Pleasure clicks his tongue. “Dean has his mother’s smarts, and his father’s tongue. I’d be embarrassed if he couldn’t use them to his advantage.”

“He has charmed everyone in the Keep.”

“Then there’s your answer.”

Dean’s shoulders are tense, and his face changes from neutral, to serious in an eyeblink. Castiel loves reading Dean’s emotions like a book, they’re clear as day, and Uriel must see it too, because his knuckles turn white on his cane. They talk for what seems like forever, Dean’s gesturing at the sea, and in the general area of Patheo. Uriel stands his ground, his head cocking to the side, his smile almost malicious.

Dean does something really stupid, then. Castiel immediately wants to run and keep Dean from dropping his sword, but he can hear the clink of it hitting the ground from here. Pleasure doesn’t turn around to see what’s going on, only his smile remains.

Uriel, with his old age and hurting back, sneers. And then, he bows down with great effort, his free hand wraps around the handle of the sword. He talks through it all, and Dean’s face is filled with something like anger, but it isn’t that horrible. It’s more like the anger you’d feel when you knew someone didn’t believe in you.

The triumph on Dean’s face is the most beautiful sight, because Uriel tries to get the sword up, but can’t seem to. The sword is stuck to the ground, as if it has been alchemically glued to the marble pathway. Uriel kneels down on the ground, and pulls the sword toward himself with no avail. It doesn’t budge until Dean easily crouches and lifts the sword with his pinky.

Pleasure turns his head to watch Dean say something to Uriel, and whispers, “Uriel will have to accept him as his King. His morals are too strong to say no to a True King. He didn’t care about Michael because he had no token, but Dean does, and that’s enough proof.”

Uriel really understands the situation, because his thumb goes down his nose, and lips, and stops at his chin. The first Lord bends the knee.

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Dean avoids Castiel all day, hiding in the Palace until another Lord arrives. Castiel joins him today, his keen blue eyes fixed on Dean, the furrowed brow makes Dean squirm. He doesn’t know what to
do with himself, his thoughts jump from Sam to Claws, from CLaws to Benny, Anna, and Charlie. It’s a never-ending cycle of worry, and it’s hard to concentrate when he meets another Lord. The terrace is sunny today, the starlight infused glass keeps the breeze away from them. The sea doesn’t stop moving, waves crash on the sand with fury.

The Lord lives close to the Palace. Dean stands very still with his sword in his hands, his chest feels tight when he sees a young man hand in hand with Pleasure. Castiel leans into him, and says it’s Lord Garth of the Meadows, the small Lordship, but very loyal to the King. Garth looks half the size of Dean and Castiel, with a friendly smile and a happy strut.

“Pleasure tells me you’re the True King! Hello!”

Dean finds him annoying, but at the same time...he doesn’t piss him off. Garth comes closer, eyeing the sword. Dean says, “Dean Winchester at your service, Lord Garth. I’m really grateful you agreed to come here.”

Garth waves it off and snorts. “I didn’t agree to anything. Your Greenie made me come and see the token. Boy, I sure hope you’re not lying, because I’d be in a tricky situation with King Novak. I’m already on his bad side, jeez.”

Dean does the same thing he did to Uriel. Drops the fucking sword on the ground next to Garth’s feet. He can almost feel the eyeroll from Castiel. If it can work once, it’ll work twice. “This is the Campbell sword. It answers only to royal blood, and I am the only one alive who can wield it.”

Garth’s sparkling eyes go down to the sword, then back to Dean. “What am I supposed to do with it?”

Dean closes his eyes and breathes in. “Try pulling it up.”

“Oh, jeez, I’m not that strong.”

Pleasure stands aside, amused. Castiel doesn’t have the patience, and says, “Just try lifting the sword. If it stays stuck to the ground, that means King Winchester isn’t lying.”

Garth grumbles to himself, crouching with his dark robes. “He isn’t King yet-”

The sword doesn’t lift when Garth tries getting it up. It doesn’t when Castiel tries. And it doesn’t when Pleasure kicks it. Only when Dean picks it up, it looks light as a feather.

Garth breathes out, eyes wider than the moon. “Okay. He is the King. Wow. Okay. What do I do with this information?”

Pleasure smiles, the toothy grin almost malicious. “You tell the other Lords, bend the knee, and prepare for the circle of Lords. The ritual must be done. Then, we shall show you proof on a parchment, but this is as much proof as you will get.”

“Can’t say no to the Campbell sword,” Garth says, nodding. Then, he bends on one knee, and does the royal greeting. “My King.”

Dean has won again, but his nerves do not subside.

Not even a little bit.
Castiel finds Dean reading a book in the Library, comfortably leaning against a big shelf of books, just like he did in the Archives. He sits down next to him in a lotus position, and intertwines his fingers together in front of him. Dean stops reading, avoids looking into Castiel’s eyes.

“You have half of the Lords on your side, now,” Castiel says, quietly.

Dean has managed winning every single argument with every Lord who came to see him. If the sword trick didn’t work, Dean would talk about the lands of the Lord, the politics concerning war, he promised only the things he could promise. It was wonderful seeing Dean go from a nervous man to a King. They started using the Dining Hall for meetings, Dean didn’t need fresh air to calm his nerves anymore. He only needed Castiel close to him for the initial meeting, and then he would completely and utterly take the Lords apart. The dark circles around Dean’s eyes show he hasn’t been sleeping much. Castiel wishes every night to go and envelop Dean in warmth and care, but when he goes to Dean’s room, Dean isn’t there.

“I’m tired,” is Dean’s answer.

Castiel shuts the book, and grabs Dean by his chin. Green eyes, Dean’s freckles, the sharp intake of breath; my Gods, Dean is incredible. “I want to help you stop worrying.”

Dean’s eyes flicker to Castiel’s lips. “Tell me about Balthazar. How did he disappear?”

Castiel places a kiss on Dean’s lips, barely there, but comforting enough to make Dean’s shoulders droop. “Why do you want to know?”

“You healed. I want to try and heal, too.”

Castiel’s heart breaks for Dean and Claws. He doesn’t know what it feels like to lose a true bond, but he figures it might be something similar. So he says, “I lost him the day I told him I loved him.”

Dean kisses Castiel’s fingers, and listens.

Castiel continues, “He was one of the Lords. I used to be very open about who I wanted to court, and he was upfront about his intentions the first time we met. All of my other endeavors have ended because of Michael, and of course, I was scared of starting anything that would count as a loss in the long run. I decided to take the risk. He was a very sensual man, and I lost myself in him. Abandoned most of my work. Samandriel helped me with the Dragossi, just so I could spend more time with Balthazar. It was a good relationship, until. Well, until I helped Samandriel and created the antidote specifically for a Dragossi. Michael lost his toy, and in turn, made me lose the person I loved.”

“How did it happen?” Dean’s voice is quiet.

“Today, I don’t know. I told Balthazar I loved him, and a few days later I received news about a new Lord taking his place. He wasn’t married, and wouldn’t have married. I searched for him. It was a very difficult time to me, I couldn’t process the thought of his disappearance until I made peace with it. I was never getting him back. And I promised myself I wouldn’t make the same mistake again.”

Dean stays silent, eyes cast down, breathing slowly. Castiel kisses Dean’s temple.

“I broke my promise,” Castiel whispers, only to the both of them to hear. “You’ve taken my heart,
Dean, and I cannot stop myself from loving you. It’s an impossible task, and I am grateful you proved me wrong. I can’t thank you enough for appearing in my life and bringing me back to where I was, to the person I used to be.”

The silence surrounds them, but it’s pleasant. And after a while, Castiel checks to see why Dean is so quiet.

He sleeps, head leaning against Castiel’s shoulder, face as calm as the sea outside today. Castiel loves him most, just like this. His Dean.
Chapter Summary

Warning: REALLY NSFW. LIKE REALLY

IF THAT'S LOVE

The sea is surprisingly calm with the clouds above Dean’s head, the terrace glass roof protecting him from the oncoming rain. There’s starlight imbedded inside of the glass, faintly glowing while Dean eats his dinner. Well, doesn’t eat, actually. It’s placed in front of him on a grey marble table, but Dean’s more interested in the sea and the cool blue of the water.

It’s refreshing to be away from all of those dark buildings, the charcoal washed leathers and the angry Giants looking at them from above. The two stone Giants that are here, however, stand in the middle of the sea, holding hands, looking peacefully at each other, still smiling. One of the hands has fallen down already, laying in the water, only the tip of a finger above the waves.

Dean doesn’t look like a King, his feet crossed on top of the marble. He’s dressed in a white loose shirt with no collar, his freckles even easier to spot than usual. The marks on his skin peek through, the black birthmarks moving along with every breath he takes. He’s got his golden-colored linen pants rolled up to his knees. There’s sand on his feet.

Castiel, though, stands like a royal. His back is straight, he’s leaning against the starlight glass. The light embosses him so perfectly, that Dean thinks he’s more beautiful than what’s in front of them. The white linen suits him. Cas turns his head, blue eyes filled with storms. He’s devastatingly gorgeous when the wind blows his messy dark hair in every direction.

Dean hasn’t kissed him in a full day. The craving comes back in waves; when Dean’s not worried about Sam, or he’s not checking if the bond with Claws is back, he thinks about Castiel, and the callouses on his hands. The hot drag of fingers over the smooth skin on Castiel’s back. Dean doesn’t turn his eyes away from Castiel, not like he’s been doing for the last month, even if Castiel was a constant thought in his head.

Dean nods over at the Giants. “What’s their story?”

“You don’t know the tale of the Lovers?” Castiel’s surprise is deeply amusing to Dean.

Dean grins. The smile, for once, doesn’t feel forced. “I want to hear it from you.”

“Well,” Castiel sighs, looking over at the happy stone couple. “As all stories go, I’ve never found if what they say about them is real. But for the sake of fairy tales, I’d like to believe this is exactly the case. The day of the Calamity, the Council of the Giants who were in Patheo travelled far from their Castles beyond the Whisper Mountains. As they crossed through the sand and ice, the Two Lovers, Ahaej and Kolvi, met the Whispers themselves, who stopped the Giants before they crossed the
Desert. The wish masters, the all-seers, they were called. The liars, sometimes.

‘Ah,’ one of the Whispers said, into the minds of the Giants, their blue and yellow eyes glinting in the shadows of the mountain. ‘The Giants walk to their death.’

‘Oh,’ the second, violet eyed Whisper agreed. ‘What a shame. What a shame, dear sibling, how pitiful.’

The Keep Giant, whose name was lost after they turned to stone, kept on walking. Many followed, but not Ahaej. Kolvi wished to follow their leader, but stood behind her lover, in fear of the Whispers.

‘Speak, Whisper,’ Ahaej said, her voice booming across the mountains. Her size did not scare the Whispers, as they floated up, circling her and Kolvi.

‘Ah,’ the blue-yellow eyed Whisper exclaimed. ‘What a wonderful, beautiful love I see. Ah, how wonderful!’

‘Oh,’ the other said. ‘How beautiful, indeed.’

‘Ah, how tragic.’

‘Oh, tragic.’

Ahaej lost her temper, as Giants did. ‘What death do you speak of?’

The blue-yellow Whisper said, malice in their voice. ‘Ah, a price has been paid.’

‘Oh, a price,’ said the other.

‘Ah,’ the yellow-blue wondered out loud. Their body of smoke glided through the air like silk. ‘How vile the Emperor.’

‘Oh, Netherreal veins are filled with poison.’

‘Ah, tragic death, isn’t it, sibling?’

‘Oh, how tragic.’

Kolvi took Ahaej’s hand into her own, fear in her eyes. The Giants of the Council were already halfway down to Jarsaki. Their looming figures in the distance threatened Kolvi and Ahaej.

Ahaej, who believed in the stories of the Whispers, who could tell if lies were told, asked, ‘Is it a curse?’

‘Ah, no curse, Giant,’ the Whisper answered.

‘Oh, no curse. Only tragic death.’

‘How long?’ Kolvi asked, her voice shaking.

The Whispers did not answer. They hid in the shadows, their laughter ringing in the mountains.

Ahaej and Kolvi walked to Patheo, to warn the other Giants. It was too late to warn the others scattered in the world, but perhaps they could ask for help from the Jarsaki Gods.
The Keep Giant, who did not talk, ignored Ahaej and Kolvi’s pleas. The Council laughed, just as the Whispers did. With this, Ahaej and Kolvi were left afraid.

Ahaej said, as they stood in the outskirts of Jarsaki, their feet placed in between the spaces Jarsaki left for Giants to walk, ‘I do not wish death, if I cannot die with you.’

Kolvi said, tears streaming down her cheeks. The tears fell down on the houses, on the land, on the crops. ‘I have loved you alive, and I will love you in death.’

Ahaej kissed Kolvi. ‘I would like to watch the sunset.’

‘I would like to cross the sea,’ Kolvi answered.

So they went. Across Jarsaki, across the lands beyond, and stepped into the sea. They held hands, as an earthquake shook the land, warning the Gods and the Giants. This was no ordinary earthquake. Ahaej knew this was the end. The Giants knew, for they felt the earth telling them what the Whispers told them, too.

Ahaej looked at Kolvi, as Kolvi looked at Ahaej. They loved each other, more than ever, and when their feet turned to stone, when their chests stopped rising and falling, they looked at each other with smiles. The Two Lovers could not cross the sea, or see the sunset. But they saw each other.”

Dean knows this story through and through, from more than one person. But the way Castiel says their names, with feeling of pain and heartbreak, makes Dean want to wrap Castiel in his arms, and look at him. He wants to cross the sea with him. To see that damned sunset.

“Why did the Emperor do it?” Dean asks, when Castiel goes quiet. “I’m sure Sammy’s told me before, but I can’t remember.”

Castiel thinks, while looking at Ahaej and Kolvi. “The Giants stood between Nethereal’s complete dictatorship of the three countries that now do not exist. I believe the first Emperor wanted the power of the Gods, but could not coax them into leaving their countries. Hesthra, Beetvinia and Wrochje were small, but their power lay in their loyalty to their Gods. The Emperor wanted that loyalty for himself. The Giants kept coming to aid the countries from Nethereal attacks, which made the Emperor angry. History doesn’t say how he did it, or what ritual he used. But the Calamity happened, and Nethereal occupied the three countries. I’m sure you’ve heard of the Pharia alley?”

“Yes,” Dean says, moving his legs down on the ground. “It’s fucked up the current Emperor is continuing the tradition of locking Netherean Gods in cages.”

Castiel looks sad. “Michael wants Nethereal. But if the Emperor releases the Gods, along with his Age Guardians, we may never win.”

“Michael is in talks with Zhwai, isn’t he?”

“Not yet,” Castiel says. “Not when he’s searching for you now.”

“Let him find me,” Dean says, amused anger lacing his words. “Before I find him and rip his throat out.”

It’s silent, then. When Dean stands up, Castiel’s not looking at him, his shoulders hunched against the wind. Dean walks up to him, snakes his hands around Castiel’s waist, and places his chin on Castiel’s shoulder. Castiel’s right hand fits right on Dean’s arm, squeezing lightly.

“You’re worried about Samandriel,” Dean says quietly.
Castiel doesn’t answer.

Dean kisses Castiel’s neck, for comfort. Castiel leans into his touch, sighing when Dean continues kissing up Castiel’s neck, and stops at his jaw.

Castiel turns then, their lips barely an inch apart. “I’m worried about you,” he says. “I’m worried about Sam, Benny, Charlie, Anna, and Samandriel. Gods, I am worried about every little thing, but when you touch me, kiss me, I forget the world. You shouldn’t be doing this to me, my King.”

Dean huffs out a laugh, their noses are touching. “I am no King of yours.”

“Then what are you?”

“Exactly, Cas,” Dean says, eyes cast downwards, to Castiel’s lips. “What am I to you?”

Castiel breathes heavily, eyes closing. His brow is furrowed, his hands wrap around Dean’s neck, getting them close. There’s no space between them anymore. “You’re everything I’ve ever needed,” he says. “You’re the reason I know Jarsaki is going to be alright. I’m so deeply enamored with you, that I keep forgetting my name when you’re so close. Dean Winchester, you’re mine.”

Dean kisses him, them. The slow drag of lips, their hot breaths make Dean’s hands shake. Castiel tastes like the storm, like the rain that falls down on the starlight glass, hiding them from the Two Lovers.

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The last Lord comes in the morning, lead by Pleasure and a guard following their tail. Dean has all of the Lords on his side, save for one. His fear doesn’t show, but inside, his heart is jumping so hard it’s making Dean nauseous.

As Dean sits in the dining room, in the soft-cushioned velvet chair, dressed in a white, high-collared parka, the Winchester emblem embossed on his left bicep, and the sword placed neatly next to the chair. Castiel places a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“I hate politics,” Dean says.

Castiel smiles. “You’ll do fine,” he reassures. “Pleasure’s going to do most of the talking anyway. Lord Henriksen has always voiced his disapproval of Michael. He was a close friend of John - your father.”

Dean looks at Castiel. The black circles around his eyes lessen with every passing day, but his tired voice tells Castiel he hasn’t slept, again. “How is he alive? Does Michael know the Lord is badmouthing him?”

“Yes,” Castiel says. “But Victor’s...quite unconventional. Nobody knows where he lives, or where his people are. He comes and goes however he wants.”

“He’s not a Lord, then,” Dean says. “I haven’t heard of him before.”

“Victor’s a Lord alright,” Castiel says. “Just...you’ll see.”

As per Pleasure’s request, all of the Guards and servants are gone from the dining hall, so Castiel
leans down. Dean’s breath hitches as Castiel kisses him.

“Who do I have to thank for this?” Dean says, eyes still fixed on Castiel’s lips.

“Youself,” Castiel says. “You look very good in white.”

Dean laughs nervously. Then chases a kiss again. “Stop this,” he says. “I won’t be able to meet this Lord if all I can think about is you.”

Castiel gives him a shy smile, and stands further away from Dean. He’s still dressed in rough linen, but the soft colors make it look somewhat ethereal when his back straightens.

Pleasure bursts in through the door, for once with no glitter on his skin, naked from the waist up. The skirt he’s wearing is flowing with tulle, a beautiful teal color changing into violet hues when he moves forward. Behind him, a dark-skinned man with even darker attire, comes in, eyebrows scrunched up. “Lord Henriksen!” Pleasure exclaims with a wide smile.

Victor rolls his eyes, ignoring Pleasure’s delightful presence, and walks over to Dean, who stands quickly from his seat. Victor doesn’t even wait before he drags the thumb down his nose to his lips. “My King.”

Dean stares at him, eyes wide. He looks at Castiel, who just shrugs. Henriksen doesn’t smile. “What? That’s it?”

Henriksen then snorts, gesturing for them to sit. “I know a Winchester child if I see one. Wish you coulda come and seen me instead of dealing with a Devil.”

Pleasure crosses his arms on his chest, grinning, still. “Oh, Henriksen,” he says. “My kind and yours were friends, once, you know.”

Victor glares at Pleasure from his seat. “Your kind fuck people over for their own benefit.”

Pleasure lets out a distasteful sound. “At least I don’t have the need to steal children and fuck corpses.”

“Not all of us fuck corpses-”

Dean can’t help but gasp loudly, shutting both of them up. He looks at Castiel for assistance, but Castiel’s staring into the distance, a lopsided smile on his face. “You’re a Laume?” He sputters out.

Henriksen and Pleasure just look at him. Henriksen says, “I was raised by one. My hair ain’t blonde now, is it?”

“Holy shit,” Dean says, forgetting he’s royal. “I’ve never seen anyone survive Laume before.”

“Now you’ve seen one. You’re going to be seeing me more since you’re going to be King.”

Pleasure nods at Victor. “Lord Henriksen made peace treaties with your mother and father when they were alive. Michael Novak refuses to spend any time with any of us humble entities.”


“Not my fault he asked for the love of his people,” Pleasure shrugs. “Why would I not ask for his Palace?”

“He doesn’t have anywhere to live.”
“Not my fucking problem.”

Castiel coughs loudly, and everyone’s attention is on him in a second. Victor’s vicious eyes become soft. “I’m sorry,” Castiel says. “Shouldn’t we discuss a treaty between King Dean and Lord Victor’s lands?”


“He was not my King,” Castiel says casually. Dean nearly chokes. “Dean is.”

“Ah, the familiarity,” Victor says, waving his hand non-committally. “How wonderful of you to help him find the sword.”

Dean wipes his bottom lip with his thumb, says, “Castiel’s never been on Michael’s side, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Are you sure he’s going to be loyal to you? He’s a fucking Novak. His family killed yours.”

Dean’s voice is threatening. “He’s more of a Winchester than a Novak. I’d like it if you treated him like my family, not Michael’s.”

Silence ensues, until Pleasure laughs. “Guess we’ve just found out we’re going to have more problems after Dean sits in that throne.”

Victor nods, silently.

Dean’s eyes go from Pleasure, to Victor, then, to Castiel. “What do you mean, more problems?”

Pleasure sits on the table, hand bracing against the marble. He’s so enchanting, it hurts watching his magnificent face. “Your relationship with Castiel Novak may raise questions of how you both came to be. If you were to leave any Novaks in the Keep, your people would never trust you again.”

Dean thinks about this. “What about Anna, then? She’s a Goddess, people have temples for her. She’s going to live in the Keep anyway, why would Castiel be a problem?”

Pleasure rolls his eyes. “He’s the second brother, who would take the throne if Michael was dead. No matter what, the people will not trust your union, unless Castiel proves his loyalty to you.”

Castiel sighs. “I could leave Jarsaki.”

Dean’s gaze snaps to Castiel. “What?”

“If this jeopardizes the trust of the people, I can’t possibly stay at your side. It’s going to be chaos when Michael falls, and we need the public to love you. I’m a liability.”

“You’re not a fucking liability,” Dean says through his teeth. “If it weren’t for you, I’d be dead, or Michael would attack Nethereal. I can’t deal with any of this without you.”

Victor shakes his head. “Castiel’s right, Dean,” he says. “We need him out of the equation.”

“He stays,” Dean hisses.

Pleasure shrugs, and no one else talks.

Victor breaks the silence, and says, “Now that I know we’re going to fuck up anyway, I’d like to
know what I’d get for backing you up. I’m unsure if you’re brainwashed just because you’re fucking him, or if you just take every stray inside of your private circle.”

Dean closes his eyes, and breathes in sharply. He pinches the bridge of his nose before grabbing his sword. Dean swings it in a practiced circle, both hands on the handle, and the silvery edge hits the marble table with a loud boom, light blinding everyone in the room. Pleasure jumps, right before the marble crashes into the ground, the table crumbling into pieces from where the sword touches the surface.

Victor’s fear is evident, eyes wide and hands up in the air in front of him, as if he can stop the marble destruction.

Dean breathes heavily, and says, “With all due respect, Lord Henriksen,” he says. “I am your King. You will address me as your King. You walk my land, and your people steal the children from my people. Novak or not, Castiel is not my gods-damned toy, he’s the man I trust the most in this fucking room. You will not be disrespectful to him, or me.”

Victor bows to him, right on the destroyed marble. His fingers are shaking a little.

Pleasure just says, “Like I said. There’s a way out of this.”

Castiel’s still silent, when Dean says, “What way?”

“He disowns his name,” Pleasure says, checking his nails. “Climbs the Keep, and asks for the Goddess of Justice to show the people whether he is to be trusted or not.”

“That would mean he needs to jump,” Dean’s voice is shaking. “There’s no fucking way.”

There’ve been so many deaths in Jarsaki, especially in Patheo, ever since the current Lady Justice demanded that people jump to their deaths to find out if their inquiry is justifiable or not. She considers death the answer to every wrong-doing, which makes Dean’s stomach clench, and arms shake. No one’s exactly sure if Lady Justice thought of this to lessen her work, or if she feels that this way of justice is the only way for people to get proof. Dean’s never witnessed any of the trials, yet he’s heard of a man who wanted to prove to his wife that he did not cheat on her with a maid, that the child wasn’t his. He fell, and Lady Justice saved him.

Castiel speaks, after a pause. “It’s a better alternative than me leaving you. If I die, the people know my loyalty was somewhere else. If I live, my name will be gone, and they have their proof.”

“I can’t ask you to jump to your death, Cas,” Dean says, eyebrows scrunched up, his eyes full of fear.

“You don’t trust my devotion to you?” Castiel sounds hurt.

“I do, I just…”

Castiel’s lips are a thin line.

Pleasure kicks a piece of marble, his wonderful color-changing eyes on them both, annoyed as fuck. “You can solve your lover's spat once we’re done discussing the treaty with Henriksen.”

Henriksen rolls his eyes, and speaks to Pleasure, albeit with a light drawl in his voice. “Who else has accepted your offer? How are they benefiting from Dean Winchester becoming King again?”

Pleasure looks at Dean and Cas, then at Henriksen. “I don’t know how much you know about
Michael and his poor taste in fashion and architecture, but Dean’s our greatest bet when it comes to not letting Zhwai into our country. Or Nethereal, for that matter. Dean is against any and all wars, which means treaties will have to be made. He is a charmer, isn’t he? And if Castiel goes through the trials, it’d even better. Dean would have the Dragossi Whisperer on his side, and the whole nation behind his back. What does Michael have? Giant fucking mess of a head, and ridiculous plans to get him into power.”

“Sounds like that nut-crack Emperor of Nethereal,” Henriksen retorts.

Castiel’s still angry voice comes out, “They make quite a pair.”

“It doesn’t matter what he sounds like,” Dean says, brushing his thumb on his lips. His heart is still thumping, worried and angry at the same time, but he continues, “What matters is that I am ready to take the Throne, and overthrow Michael.”

Henriksen purses his lips, nodding. “Alright, then, Your Majesty. How may I help?”

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Dean can see Castiel’s silhouette from his windows, the sea and the Two Lovers covered in darkness. The starlight terrace makes Castiel’s hunched shoulders look even more angry than Dean already knows he is.

As Castiel turns to go back into the house, Dean practically runs from his room, then climbs down the stairs to the main hall. The house is quiet, with all the servants asleep, only the sound of the waves crashing coming from open windows. Dean catches Castiel going through the oak doors, the curtains hanging on the door, blowing open once the rough wind hits, with Dean scared as hell to confront Castiel.

Castiel raises his striking blue eyes to Dean, the single moment of them meeting makes him halt.

As dramatic as this already feels like, a lightning strikes behind Castiel’s back, right into Ahaej’s shoulder. The sky lights up for a second, embossing Castiel in a magnificent aura.

“Dean,” Castiel says, calmly. “You should go sleep.”

Dean doesn’t dare close his eyes. He opens his mouth, and closes it, but can’t get a word out. It’s as if his throat is closed. Castiel ignores the silence, closes the doors. It’s just them and the painful nothing.

It’s not the first time Dean’s had to talk about his feelings. Castiel moves toward the stairs, walking around Dean without their shoulders touching, when Dean’s hand moves faster than his mind. Castiel’s fingers are cold beneath his.

“I trust you,” Dean says, eyes cast down, voice hoarse. “I trust you with Sam’s life, with Claws’ and mine. I just. I don’t know if I can watch you climb the Keep and fall.”

Castiel moves to remove his hand from Dean’s grip, but seems to decide against it after a pause. Dean sees his lips moving, but the pounding in his ears distracts him enough to hear only the last sentence, “...I can leave.”
Dean feels as if he’s about to vomit. It’s hard to breathe. “I don’t want you to leave, either,” he manages out.

Castiel turns fully to him, raises his hands to cup Dean’s face. Makes Dean look at him, eyebrows furrowed with worry. Castiel’s soft eyes leave Dean melting in his arms. “I put my faith in you,” Castiel says, close enough for Dean to smell the tree oil on his skin, the one Dean likes using in the baths. “I would like a little more faith from you. I’ve thought about this from your point of view, but here’s where we’re different. I’d let you do it, because I trust your judgment. Would you want to die if you weren’t loyal to me?”

“No, but - “

“Exactly,” Castiel says. “I know Lady Justice will deem me trustworthy. The question is if you will. I gave you my word, Dean. A small strand of my hair. Don’t you remember?”

Oh, Dean remembers now. It’s still underneath his pillow, left there with Michael. Dean savors the feeling of air in his lungs, closes his eyes to feel Castiel’s fingertips on his jaw, the thumb slowly brushing over Dean’s lips. Dean thinks about these hands, splayed over the stone of the Keep, nails digging into the crevices of the Giant, then arms open wide while Castiel falls, his mussed up dark hair and eyes open, seeing how the Giant stares at him with those dead eyes. Dean doesn’t want to think about it, but he does, and Castiel’s touch doesn’t help at all.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop,” Castiel says. Dean feels Castiel’s breath ghosting over his cheek. “Let me make this decision for you.”

“Then make my mind stop,” Dean says, forced through his teeth. “Make me think you’re not going to die. Let me feel you.”

Castiel’s sharp intake of breath makes Dean’s skin goosebump, hands shakily clutching Castiel’s linen shirt. “I can. But it won’t solve the problem.”

“The problem is that whenever I close my eyes, I see you falling to your fucking death. Whenever I’m alone, I think about Claws alone and scared, or tortured, or worse, dead on the ground next to you. I keep thinking of Sam bleeding in the Keep, with Charlie’s body on top of his. Benny, Anna, Samandriel - all of their bodies keep piling up on top of one another, and it never stops, okay? Please. Help me ignore these thoughts at least for one day, Cas.”

Castiel kisses him, desperately. The tip of his tongue touches Dean’s upper lip, tasting Dean’s fear, somehow searching for a way to relieve Dean’s agonizing imagination. Gods, Dean’s mind is set on worrying about every damned thing on this earth, but when Castiel drags his fingers down to the nape of Dean’s neck, Dean’s thoughts stop. Then run again, this time whirling around Castiel’s exploring touches.

Dean realizes he’s never seen Castiel like this. Never this careful about the way that he moved, with heated skin, and hungry touches. Dean wraps his arms around Castiel, sighs into the kiss just as Castiel pulls him even closer, their bodies fitting like they’re stuck together, infinity of feelings surrounding them. Dean kisses Castiel harder, experimenting with the way Castiel responds to Dean’s ministrations, and Dean earns a barely-there groan, a small sound from the back of Castiel’s throat.

Dean pauses for a second, mid-kiss. Castiel’s breathing heavily, and when Dean opens his eyes, he finds Castiel’s fixated on him.

“I need you,” Dean says, meaning his words. Castiel’s nodding already, lips parted, the pink of his
cheeks wildly beautiful in the dim lights of the Hall. “I need you with me.”

“Yes,” Castiel answers, kissing Dean like it’s everything he wanted to hear. “Yes.”

Dean doesn’t need another word. He takes Castiel’s hand into his, and leads them both into his own chambers, with the windows open and the waves thundering. They haven’t slept together in one bed for the entirety of their stay here, and now Dean wonders why. Once the door is closed behind them, they’re both unsure of how to proceed, how to manage the beasts inside of their chests that want to touch, smell, taste with no fabric in the way.

Castiel’s chest is moving as if it’s hard to breathe in with the air so thick between them. Dean moves into Castiel’s space, touching the linen on his chest, where Castiel’s heart is. “I know you’re angry with me.”

“I am,” Castiel says, looking at Dean’s lips. It’s incredibly alluring.

“And you still followed me here,” Dean says with a tiny smile.

“This way I can direct my anger somewhere else,” Castiel says, his hands placed on the lining of Dean’s breeches, pulling them closer through the hoops. “Even if I am angry with you, you are still my King. I won’t just stop following you whenever we disagree, Dean.”

Dean’s growing uncomfortably hard with Castiel so close. The sound of waves calms him down, makes him think about what’s happening now, in this moment. Dean has seen Castiel without his stupid linens, but never like this. Dean knows he’s lean, with strong muscles. Beautiful. Dean’s mind goes to the dreams he’s had about Cas, with him sleeping naked on his bed, on Jarsaki black sheets. Not exactly what’s going to happen tonight, though. The sheets on Dean’s huge bed are a vivid lilac.

Perhaps when they’re in the Keep, Dean can see what he’s been dreaming about.

Castiel reaches for the hem of Dean’s shirt, splaying his fingers beneath the fabric. Dean’s concentrated on what’s going on there, more than what Castiel’s saying, “I’ve followed you into your rooms because I need you as much as you need me. This is not going to change. My feelings for you won’t change. I told you that day, when you found the sword, that it wasn’t the time and place for what I wanted you to do to me. I’ve realized I’m wasting precious time not knowing what you feel like underneath me, when we’re on the brink of war. I’m lead by anger, but this,” Castiel moves his hand over Dean’s hardness, flicking two fingers over the lining. “Is driving me insane.”

Dean closes his eyes against the sensation of Castiel’s hands on him, pressing harder with the heel of his palm. Castiel’s watching him with a dark look, biting his lip while Dean’s in pure bliss.

“I love it when we disagree,” Dean breathes out. He’s getting weaker with every touch. Castiel’s nose is a little colder than his. “Do you get hopelessly turned on whenever I piss you off?”

Castiel kisses him, once. He’s so fucking alluring, it’s hard to concentrate. “I’m hopelessly attracted to you regardless of the situation.”

“Were you turned on when I picked the sword up?”

Castiel laughs, husky, low. “If I wasn’t preoccupied with saving us both, I would have thought about you, yes.”

“Wow,” Dean says, kissing Castiel back. He’s practically whispering into Castiel’s mouth. “I’ll take note to be extremely badass next time.”
Castiel mouths at Dean’s jaw, his breath hot. A shiver runs down Dean’s back. Castiel’s already palming Dean’s cock through the rough fabric, making Dean’s head swim. “Well,” Castiel murmurs. “You are indeed badass for not avoiding me.”

Dean leans in. Castiel’s lips are incredibly soft, moving in practiced ease when Dean parts them with his tongue. Castiel tastes like something sweet, one of the fruits they’d eaten at dinner. Dean’s disappointed a bit, purely because the underlying taste of Cas is so much better. His hips move accordingly to Castiel’s hand, and he decides it’s unfair Castiel’s doing all the work, while Dean gets to reap the benefits. Not like touching Cas back wouldn’t be of benefit, though.

So Dean does just that. He moves his hands down Castiel’s back, resting on his backside. Carefully pressing, he tugs Castiel closer, enough for both of their hips to line up, with Castiel’s hand between them. Castiel groans, sending a spark of want through Dean. It’s hard to decide what he wants more - to hear Castiel’s moans, or have Castiel’s mouth all over him.

Castiel’s much more open, pleasantly sensual when they’re alone. Dean likes this version of him just as much as when Castiel’s angry, or stoic, or plain royally cold whenever they’re dealing with Lords, or politics. Truth be told, Dean enjoys seeing every part of Castiel.

Castiel kisses him again, and again, hand moving up, catching the hem of Dean’s flowy shirt, hitching it up a notch until Dean lets him take it off. Castiel’s already seen the marks on Dean’s skin, traces them with the tips of his fingers, and Dean follows his movements with hungry eyes. Dean’s always liked having a first time with someone. And with Castiel, every time seems like the first, he learns new things about him with every kiss they share, the touches Castiel leaves on his burning skin, words, glances, heartbeats - it’s overwhelming to know Castiel wants Dean the way he is. Not because he’s the Lost Boy. Because he’s Dean.

Dean vaguely remembers the first time he had seen Castiel half naked. The first training day, when he stood in the Dungeon baths and panicked next to Samandriel, unable to move forward. The baths, when Dean found out about the markings on his skin. Castiel’s lush dark hair and blue eyes remain as alluring as they were then. Today, all of this belongs to Dean. The stare, the touches. Dean wants it all.

“Let me take care of you,” Castiel breathes. Dean finds himself nodding, head too clear for any words.

Castiel kneels.

The gesture punches air out of Dean’s lungs. The breeze coming from open windows carries a salty smell of the sea, hitting naked skin as Castiel undoes his the lacing on Dean’s breaches, the practiced ease making Dean’s lungs burn, and mouth dry.

Castiel places open mouthed kisses on Dean’s hip-bones, then beneath his belly button as his hands drag downwards, stopping at the back of Dean’s thighs. Dean’s almost shaking from how much he wants Cas, but the second Castiel pulls the breeches down, leaving Dean naked, Dean’s more worried about the fact that Castiel is still dressed.

With all of this in mind, Dean isn’t ready to see Castiel’s dark look from where he kneels. It’s a look Dean’s seen on Castiel twice already, but never from this angle, and he hasn’t pieced it together before. The first time he had seen it was that first day they trained together, when Dean almost managed to knock Castiel over. The second, when Dean had drawn the sword from the Giant. Dean gets it now. How can he not, when Castiel closes his eyes, and kisses in between Dean’s thigh, and where he needs Castiel’s mouth the most.
He’s so hard, it’s difficult to think of anything else at the moment, except for the things Castiel’s doing so close to Dean’s cock, the small, exploring touches, the heated breath of air hitting his hardness, how Castiel’s inching closer to it with every kiss, and nip. My gods, Castiel’s the most beautiful person Dean’s ever seen, and to have him kneeling, mouth worshiping Dean’s body with all that he has is even more surreal than he’d ever imagined.

Then, Castiel licks the underside of Dean’s cock, leaving a hot trail with his tongue. Dean’s about to lose his mind, when a low, raspy sound leaves his throat, his eyes close, savoring the sensation of Castiel fucking Novak humming around Dean’s most sensitive body part. When Castiel takes Dean into his mouth, fully, Dean about screams inside of his head, with his hand flying up to latch onto Castiel’s lush hair, clutching tightly. Castiel seems to like it even more when Dean’s guiding him, the moans a clear indication of just how much he’s enjoying it. Dean thinks he’s not going to last long, especially with Castiel so adamant about finishing Dean off with his mouth, but Dean has other plans. He’s set on giving Castiel everything he needs, however much he needs it.

So he tugs Castiel up, and despite Castiel’s protests, Dean kisses him shut. “Seven Giants,” Dean breathes into Castiel’s mouth, the salty aftertaste of Dean still there. Dean loves their tastes mingling together. “I can’t get enough of you.”

Castiel’s not much of a talker in his most intimate moments, so he just acts. Dean doesn’t get a chance to get Castiel out of his clothes, when Castiel throws his shirt off on the ground, and starts taking off his linen pants, when Dean stops him with his own hands. “Let me,” Dean pleads, and Castiel bites his lips, removing his fingers from the strings of his pants.

Dean’s shaking, but as Castiel kisses him, he’s getting bolder, tugging at the strings to set the fabric free. It falls to the ground just as gracefully, and for the first time, Dean opens his eyes to Castiel’s, while they’re both vulnerable together.

Castiel breathes heavily, eyes fixated on Dean’s, mouth ready, hands on Dean, moving to Dean’s cock. The touch makes Dean’s mind rush at a million paces per hour, like the stormy sea behind them. The only wish he has right now, is to touch Castiel back. To draw out the moans, to see Castiel come undone in the sheets. Castiel’s anything but stoic, passionate to the point of Dean finishing right then and there, and the twist of his hand makes Dean see stars.

They kiss, feverishly, when Dean takes Castiel into his hand, the silky smooth skin a wonderful gift he never expected to be given. Castiel’s loyalty and promises hit him all at once, and he’s flying, soaring inside of his own head. It’s so good to feel wanted. Even better when Castiel pushes him toward Dean’s bed, never stopping the kissing.

Once they’re on the bed, Castiel lies in between Dean’s legs, brushing their cocks together, in a slow, torturous glide. It’s feels so good, Dean’s dying to know what it’s like to feel Castiel inside of him, moving in tandem, with Castiel’s hands around him, and Dean’s nails digging into Castiel’s back. It’s so incredibly overwhelming, Dean doesn’t know what to do with himself when Castiel kisses his neck, and takes them both in hand, stroking with strength.

“Cas,” Dean moans. At least he can latch onto Castiel, his fingers etching into Castiel’s skin. Castiel’s answering groan makes Dean’s back shiver, and he locks his legs around Castiel’s backside, trying to move as languidly as the other. It’s a coordinated mess, but Dean loves every second of it. Castiel’s wonderful, and this is wonderful. The perfect tandem of them showing their devotion to each other is more than enough to calm all of Dean’s thoughts down, except for one. He wants Castiel to make love to him, now.
“Cas, Cas, Cas,” Dean chants. “Please. I want you to -”

Dean feels alive with Castiel above him. Every touch sends sharp pleasure through his body; Castiel’s biting Dean’s neck. Dean has prepared for this day, searched throughout the Palace to find something that would help them both feel more pleasure than they’re already experiencing together. Dean kisses Castiel’s cheek, and moves his shaking hand toward the small cabinet next to the bed. Castiel instantly understands what’s happening and takes the vial of clear liquid into his hand.

Dean doesn’t let him pause for even a second. He bites Castiel’s shoulder, and says, almost moaning, “Please.”

Castiel is tender everywhere it counts. The first touch is cold, and the second one is accompanied with a kiss to Dean’s temple. Dean moves along with Castiel, their foreheads fit together. Sharing a breath, they join like two lovers, fitting a universe in between. Dean leans his head back on the pillows, mouth open in bliss, with Castiel’s lips peppering kisses down Dean’s throat. It’s slow, deliberate, and Dean feels so full with Cas and the climbing euphoria.

As Castiel moves for the very first time, Dean knows this had to be destiny. He has never felt this free with anyone in his life, and never as in sync as he is now. Dean thanks whatever Gods had led him to this place, with Castiel in his arms, and loses himself in the ecstasy. Castiel treats him like the King he is, worshipping every part of his body with his fingers and mouth, snapping his hips faster and faster, watching Dean writhe beneath.

Dean comes without a warning, brows furrowed and nails digging into Castiel’s back. Moonlight shines on their naked bodies, blesses them with something intangible and eternal, and Castiel follows, with his toes curled and blue eyes closed.

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Castiel sleeps like the dead. The morning comes unexpectedly, with a hand traveling up his leg, then thigh, then resting on his hip-bone, just where Castiel would like it most. He opens one of his eyes to see Dean smiling at him, his freckles stunning in the morning light that comes through the open window. Castiel’s gaze travels down Dean’s marked chest, staring at the purple bruises he left yesterday, love bites on Dean’s neck, and he concentrates on Dean’s hand.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Dean says, mouthing at Castiel’s neck.

Castiel feels himself getting harder by the second. He hasn’t felt arousal like this since he was a teenager. Dean’s fingers brush at Castiel’s hardness, making him hiss and arch into Dean’s waiting touch.

Dean moves over Castiel, happiness practically shining from his smug grin. Dean’s as hard, pressing himself against Castiel. Castiel bites into Dean’s shoulder, encouraging Dean to move. There’s nothing shy about Dean’s intentions, he’s taking whatever Castiel gives him with such hunger, it’s difficult for Castiel to close his eyes and enjoy himself when all he wants to do is see this unabashed pleasure on Dean’s face. Moving his hands over Dean’s back, Castiel breathes in shakily, it’s still difficult to believe this is happening and Michael can’t take this away from him.

Dean doesn’t stop his slow movements, bracing himself over Castiel with one hand clutching the
bedding next to Castiel’s shoulder. He kisses Castiel on the lips, biting playfully. “ Couldn’t stop thinking about touching you from the moment I woke up.”

Castiel meets Dean’s hips with his own, drawing a low groan out of Dean’s throat. Dean has no restraint when it comes to making love, and Castiel loves that as much as seeing Dean comfortable in his own skin in the privacy of their room. Dean moves his hand down, guiding Castiel to his heat.

As Castiel slowly thrusts inside, Dean throws his head back, lips parted and the blush on his cheeks goes down his chest. Castiel realizes Dean prepared himself for this while Castiel was sleeping, which makes the heat inside of him burn even harder.

Castiel growls, gathering Dean in his arms and sitting up, turning them over. “ You let me sleep while you touched yourself,” he says, accusingly, as he moves back and forth, snapping with every third thrust. Dean moans, loudly. “ You deprived me of you.”

Dean bites Castiel earlobe, his breath hot on Castiel’s skin. “Couldn’t wait for you to fuck me like I deserve,” he whispers, making Castiel move faster. “Don’t you want to please your King?”

Castiel’s hand wraps around Dean’s cock. It’s unbelievable how easy it is to draw a response from Dean. Lead by his eternal wish to know Dean as well as he knows himself, Castiel touches him in different ways, checking which place is the most sensitive, which makes Dean crumble in his hands, what words drive Dean insane.

Fitting his forehead in the crevice of Dean’s neck, Castiel breathes heavily. He mumbles, voice hoarse, “I won’t last long. Gods, Dean-”

“Come for me,” Dean groans out. “ Fuck, let me see you.”

Castiel pushes up, and stares straight into Dean’s eyes, pushing closer and closer to the edge. Dean bites his lip, his fingers cup Castiel’s face, fixating them both to look at each other when Castiel releases his own restraint and lets go.

Dean comes first, missing how Castiel’s eyes close, and they’re there, reaching for that feeling of absolute pleasure. When Castiel comes back down from heaven, Dean’s already chuckling lightly. “Can’t believe I have no self-control.”

Castiel kisses him, deeply, before saying, “I don’t mind. If I had self-restraint, I wouldn’t have let you off the hook for having fun by yourself while I slept.”

“It was kinda hot,” Dean says. “I thought about how you’d react.”

“How did I?” Castiel smiles, feeling boyish, forgotten innocence creeping up.

“Nothing like I imagined you would,” Dean says, hugging Castiel close to him. “Even better than anything I had in my head. Fuck, I’d love to go for round two, if I could.”

Castiel checks out the window, noting it’s still early morning. He looks back at Dean, deadpan. “Is that a challenge?”

Dean kisses him with a blinding smile.

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It’s painfully simple to be with Castiel, Dean thinks day after day when he wakes up. As Pleasure prepares for Dean’s eventual taking of the throne, they’re left at the Palace together. Dean enjoys himself even when he and Castiel are practicing their traditional lines for the trial and the Lord Circle. A Lord Circle has always been the only way to prove a rightful King, and once Dean perfects his speech, he watches Castiel recite his with closed eyes, naked in bed in the morning, or when they’re eating together. The fear inside of his chest does not subside whenever he thinks about Castiel falling to his death because of his loyalty. What Dean does, though, is keep touching Castiel. Be it simple touches before sleep, or heated mornings with Castiel’s moans filling their room.

The day Pleasure comes with Sam and traditional Winchester clothes, Dean’s heart falls down to his toes.

“It’s time,” Pleasure says. “We’re leaving tomorrow. The Lords are preparing for the ritual, and the only thing left is to send Michael your regards. I’ll come transport you in the morning, I have one more thing left to do before we go and fight Michael.”

Dean hugs Pleasure, for the first time in his life. To Dean’s surprise, Pleasure is warm, like a human. Pleasure wraps his hands around Dean in return, squeezing a little. Dean says, “Stay safe.”

Pleasure laughs. “I will. Get ready. We’re going to fuck Michael over, King Winchester.”

With this, he’s gone, and Dean’s left with nothing in his arms. Sam, who was standing to the side, runs over to Dean, almost crying. Dean grabs Sam by his shoulders, worried and happy, and says, “I missed you, little brother.”

Sam brushes tears away with the back of his hand. “Is that all you’re going to say to me? I haven’t seen you in three months, Dean.”

Dean gathers him up in a bear hug, and Sam clutches at Dean’s clothes. His Jarsaki black clothing is so dark in comparison to Dean’s white parka. “We’ll talk. I’ll tell you everything, just let me worry for a second.”

Castiel joins them for dinner, and they talk about Sam. Sam has been staying in a small Library where Michael couldn’t find him, looking through old scripts and books, trying to find more information about the Giants and Michael, and the language of Zhwai. Dean, in turn, talks about the Lords and what he promised to all of them, about politics he’s going to have to think about from now on. Sam promises to help him with everything he needs once he’s sitting on the throne. With the two of them, Dean doesn’t feel alone anymore.

Like many Kings before, Dean sends a letter to Michael, pleading a fair fight and a silent surrender. Dean doubts Michael will go down without a bang.

At night, Dean makes love to Castiel with more feeling than ever before. He looks into his blue eyes as if it’s the last time he’s seeing them at nightfall. The morning isn’t as easy, though. There’s an underlying tension between them, even when Dean is dressing up in his dark Jarsaki clothes, with the Winchester heirloom embroidered in. Castiel hugs him around his waist from behind, kissing Dean’s shoulder.

There’s a soft pop from somewhere behind them, announcing Pleasure’s arrival.

Castiel closes his eyes, and whispers. “Go forth, My King. Jarsaki bows only to you.”
The Shadow

As per an old tradition, when the King’s loyalty to his people falters, the Jarsakian Lords gather around the Palace, alerting the city of Patheo that the King has done something terribly wrong. The last King that deserved the treatment of the Lord Council was King Viltis, the last of his lineage. He was sentenced to death, and a new King took his place. Samuel Campbell, the one to rule with an iron fist, and the one to bring the legendary sword back to life with the blood of his enemies.

And now, Michael doesn’t even come out when the Lords stand in front of the Keep. Even Lord Henriksen is here, who people thought was dead for the longest time. People gather from all over Patheo, some of them cross the forest to see what is to be of Michael. The people whisper as Dean goes through them, a hood on his face and his official Winchester armor tightly clasped on his body. Castiel kissed Dean right before Pleasure brought both of them in a small street close to the Keep.

The True King, they say.

He holds the Campbell sword, some share what they’ve heard from the Lords.

Michael doesn’t have a token, a woman whispers to her friend.

It’s overwhelming. Dean’s walking down the path to the Keep, walking through the Lords who all nod at him with respect. The crowd all but gasp when some of them drag their fingers down their foreheads, down to their nose, and lips. There’s an official entrance to the Keep, always heavily Guarded. Dean has never tried entering through here, and all he can think about is that he could’ve stayed inside, with Claws and Castiel. With Sam, Benny, Charlie, and Anna. The sword feels heavy in his hand, the polished silver catches light, turning it into a rainbow for a single second. The attention from the crowd is unsettling, crushing from within, but Dean walks until he stands right in front of the double sided stairs, stepping on the first one with feigned confidence. Once he stands in front of the Lords, and his people, there’s no mistaking the country has turned itself against Michael. Dean takes a deep breath, getting ready to take the final step towards his future. After this, there is no turning back. Saving Jarsaki and his friends, his bonded Dragossi, and his lover is what Dean will fight for, which leaves him one last thing to do. Dean looks up into the sky, at the Keep Giant, takes a moment for himself, the last selfish breath of true freedom, and takes his hooded coat off. The sword comes in full view, as well as Dean’s armor with the Winchester sigil. Dean turns to the people, and holds a hand up.

The crowd is by the thousands now. The air is thick with tension, and the sky is still clouded, with the promise of a storm. Dean’s heart beats heavily in his chest, thinking about Claws, wishing he could share this moment with her, and feel her calming warmth. The viewing area looks as if it’s filled with crows, the people are wearing nothing but black. Dean has missed this unity. “The Lord Council has gathered today to end two decades of terror, poverty, and an oncoming war for a man who would never fight for you. I, Dean Winchester, son of Mary and John Winchester, place my rightful token in front of the Gods and the Lords, along with the proof of my lineage.”

Dean does as Pleasure instructed, throwing the sword on the ground in front of him, hearing the sound of the metal hitting the stone path. There is no rejection from the people in front of him, no
objections; no one leaves. The Lords, one by one, come to Dean, kneeling next to the sword.

There’s a deadly silence even after the first Lord tries, and doesn’t get the sword up. The sword remains stuck to the ground, unyielding, the blade unforgiving and cruel to the ones who do not deserve to have it in their hands. Lord Henriksen is the last to try, but even he can’t bring the sword to life. Now, come the volunteers from the people of Patheo, trying and failing to get the sword. The silver stains with mud from dirty hands, with sweat and tears of the people, who understand the Lost Boy has found his way home with a true token.

The Lords go back to their standing positions, proudly accepting Dean as the True Heir to the throne, their stance respecting Dean and his token. With this, Dean easily lifts the sword from the ground, the grip feeling like home even with all of these people watching every single move he’s making. He raises the sword, in silent celebration.

He voices out, loudly, “I call upon a trial of purification. To prove the innocence of a man you thought guilty, we plead the Lady Justice move forward. We plead the jump trial.”

Castiel comes into view, wearing nothing but his old linen, shoeless, bare for the world to accept it. He looks like a simple man, from a village just like Dean was, humble to his bones. No one knows who he is and why does this trial sound so important yet. A confused murmur reaches Dean’s ears.

Castiel stands close to Dean, and raises his hand. “I plead Lady Justice hear my prayer, and defend my honor. I am Castiel Novak, The Dragossi Master of Jarsaki, the brother of the guilty King. I plead Lady Justice to renounce my name, for I only have one True King. I plead my life to Dean Winchester.”

Dean almost chokes on his fear. Hearing Castiel say it is worse than hearing him practice the words with Pleasure. Sick to his stomach, Dean looks at Castiel for the longest time, committing all of his features to memory. But if anything happened to him, even if Castiel was lying, Dean would rather die than live without Castiel in this world. It’s a silent revelation, one that settles in the back of his mind, eating away at his nerves.

Lady Justice steps forward, in all her glory. She’s smaller than the both of them, her posture hunched, but even with it, she looks stunning. Power radiates off her like a wave. Pleasure had immediate contact with her, and told her about the trial, asking her to be gentle with Castiel. She only scoffed at him. Told him that Justice will prevail, and she will not play any games with them. If Castiel jumps, and she sees he’s trustworthy, she will help him. If not, she will watch him fall to his death, like she did numerous others.

Michael is still nowhere to be seen. Dean’s getting anxious, because he wants to get this over with, but when Lady Justice steps toward Castiel with a parcel in her hands, Dean loses his mind, because it’s truly happening. What if Castiel dies? What if he can never see him again?

Castiel’s breathing hard, barely even looking at anyone else as he’s tearing at the parcel, ripping it open and letting the pieces fall down next to his feet. The people look angry that he’s being given a chance, Novak scum. Dean doesn’t care. Without Castiel, none of this matters.

The wrapping falls gracefully, the ribbon lightly flows down a few feet away from him, leaving Castiel gasping in awe as a sheer cloak shimmers in between his fingers, the texture even lighter and more illuminating than what he’s ever seen in his entire life. It's covered in rainbow stones that change color depending on the light source. He's seen the stones on Michael’s crown, and on Anna’s clothes, but never like this. Lost in between centuries of wars, the rainbow stones have been almost impossible to find, so holding a thing so precious in his shaking hands makes Castiel almost sway on his feet, and suddenly he’s wiping away the hot tears on his cheeks. Dean wants nothing
more than to grab Castiel’s face in his hands, to kiss away all of the fear and pain, but he stays put.

It fits Castiel perfectly, but he doesn’t move at all to see the stones change their color. They catch sunlight so well even his dark linen clothes look royal, the soft blue of his eyes seems to shine even brighter. Castiel touches the fabric with the tips of his fingers, breathes in through his nose, lets his shoulders tense and brows furrow. He hates how it looks, Dean understands. What he hates the most is that when Castiel looks up, the Giants stand in the far distance, the raised hands of the old creatures turned to stone. Castiel looks as angry as they are. Like he’s caught up in a scheme, like it’s not fair he had to live this way and that Michael isn’t showing up yet. What a fucking coward.

“I accept,” Lady Justice says. Her auburn hair falls gracefully on her tunic, which is the same color as her skin. Light brown, as warm as autumn.

When Castiel takes her hand so she can take him up with her magic, the terrace opens. The one only used whenever Michael wanted to announce something, to mock the crowds of people, or announce yet another tax so that he could bathe in riches.

Dean’s heart falls down to his toes when he sees Claws, crawling down the terrace, with Gordon sitting in the harness. Claws has her jaws shut with alchemical wire, and when she sees Dean, she whines. Gordon slashes down, opening up a wound on her skin, and she yelps. Dean takes his sword, about ready to rip Gordon’s face off with his bare hands, when Castiel stops him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. Dean looks only at Claws. She looks like she’s been starved, tortured, and crammed into small spaces. Her scales are a dark gray, like they lost all of their shine, but her red eyes are the worst. All hope is gone, but she wants Dean to know it’s not his fault. Dean wants to rip everything in his way to get to her.

The silence is deafening.

“I see you have brought us a crowd, Evia,” Michael says, hissing through his teeth. “Never thought you had it in you, to start a rebellion against a King.”

Dean smiles up at him, and opens up his arms wide. “Not Evia, you fucking asshole!”

“I do know that,” he says, looking at his nails. “Dear Benny, Charlie, and Anna have told me as much. For how long were you going to hide your true identity, Dean? Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“Come down here, and leave everyone else,” Dean shouts. “This is between you and me only, Michael! Fight with me for your fucking throne, if you want it that much.”

Michael claps his hands, and Gordon slashes again. Dean charges, but Castiel grabs his arm now, his strength overpowering, and doesn’t let him go.

Michael only laughs, a deep, horrifying kind of sound. Dean doesn’t let his anger cloud his vision. Michael’s face is hollowed, ashy gray, with veins dark and pulsing. Just like Zhwai, Michael looks like a nightmare. “Brother,” he says, apologetically. “Don’t do this. Serve your King, not this... fool you had under your wing for the last year. I would pardon all of your mistakes. Just step forward, kneel for me.”

Castiel stares him down, and releases Dean’s hand. Once Dean charges practically running up the stairs leading to the terrace, Michael snaps his fingers, and a Dragossi comes out through the doors, another one left behind. Castiel’s heart breaks as well, and as Dean tries to reach Michael in time, Michael easily jumps on the Dragossi, and flies, laughing. There’s an arbalet in his hands, a vague threat.
Dean is torn between going after Michael, and saving Castiel from falling. But when he looks back, Castiel reaches for him, and then gets taken away by Lady Justice, who easily takes Castiel by the hand and jumps up, wings of her own extending like a Dragossi. There’s no other thing left to do rather than save Claws.

She’s struggling against her captor, and Gordon almost falls down. Once Dean goes up on the terrace, Gordon laughs like a maniac and jumps down, turning his sword in his hands. The chains holding Claws to the ground clasp hard, making her let out a painful shriek.

“So you think you’re King? I doubt that, little boy. I’ve taken up bigger opponents than you,” Gordon roars.

When Dean moves, and their swords clash, the alchemical sirens start wailing, announcing a trial about to commence.

***

Castiel isn’t afraid of falling. But when he stands on top of an outstretched stone hand which has three missing fingers, he’s afraid of the unknown. He’s breathing hard, his lungs are desperately burning with the need to slow his blood flow down. The adrenaline he’s feeling is already wavering, leaving him with painful sobs of breath, his legs tense so hard they shake.

Castiel’s vision blacks out for a minute or two, and he forget where he is. The air he breathes with short breaths set his lungs on fire, Castiel is wheezing until his breath evens out and he stays there, his fingers clutching at the blindingly glimmering coat. Dean’s face comes to mind, his green eyes amused. That smile. His fingers on Castiel’s skin.

“Do you have anything left to say, Castiel?” Lady Justice asks.

“The sky is my shelter,” Castiel answers, then looks her in the eye, calm as a fish in water. Dean’s laugh rings in his ears. “And I am yours to judge.”

Lady Justice places a hand on his chest, and without hesitation, pushes him down the Keep.

It feels a lot like flying, when Castiel is falling down. He doesn’t feel fear, not in the way you’d think he would. As Castiel is falling down to his death, time slows down. He remembers all of the times he spent laughing with Dean, and how it felt to have Dean’s hand in his, his hot breath on his. Dean, Dean, Dean. His wonderful, absolute Dean.

Castiel dares not close his eyes, and observes the light dance on other Giants. They all seem to be sad that he’s falling down, but Castiel tells them not to worry. He’s falling, but he’s going to be saved, and he’s going to spend the rest of his days with Dean. Castiel desperately wants to hold Dean’s fingers in between his.

Still, he falls, and still, there seems to be no end.

***

Gordon is slower than Castiel, Dean notices. With Castiel’s voice in his head, Dean charges and
charges, attacking when he can, defending himself when it’s needed.

*Anticipate every move*, Castiel says, and Dean sees Gordon think about his next charge. Dean counters it with such ease, it’s liberating.

*Be quick, don’t think, see.* He does. Dean uses his strength where it matters, and Gordon is breaking a sweat. The laugh on his lips is dead, his concentration is fleeting. Dean notices something strange about him, as if he’s moving with such strain that Gordon looks like he’s floating outside of his body.

Gordon takes hit after hit, but manages to cut Dean’s hand once. With a bleeding finger, Dean roars with all of his anger, attacking Gordon with such skill, with so much agility, that Gordon slips, loses his footing, and falls, hard.

Dean stomps his foot on top of Gordon’s chest, holding his sword to Gordon’s throat.

Gordon smiles through bloody teeth. “Fucking Winchester,” he coughs up. “Was I that easy?”

Dean doesn’t smile, or answer. There’s nothing but cold rage in Dean’s throat, so he slashes with no hesitation.

Gordon lies in a pool of blood, his body convulsing, but Dean drops his own sword to try and get Claws out of those chains. Dean screams for her inside of his own head, and she’s quickly losing her breath, trying to move with Dean’s bloody hands on the chains. There’s blood coming out through her wounds, mixing with Dean’s occasionally. He hears chants behind him, and as he follows everyone’s fingers up, he sees a figure falling down.

Castiel.

Dean can’t choose between them. He can’t, so he cries out, “Help me get her out of here!” and some of the Lords come forward, running up the stairs to the terrace. They pull at the chains, helping Claws get out one bolt at a time. She’s breathing easier, and can stand up on her both legs, but it takes a few seconds for her to understand what’s happening.

As Dean starts sobbing out of fear, she extends her wings, getting rid of the rest of the chains, her magnificent wings extending for everyone to see. Even though Dean feels like he’s going mad, he can tell Claws is royal as all hell, her power surging through the crowd.

Everything happens in a second, and Dean can’t believe what he’s seeing. Castiel is nearing the ground, his coat glittering with every color of the rainbow, and Dean loves him more than anything. He prays to every living God, to all of those creatures in the forest, and every Giant around Jarsaki for Castiel to be okay, and Claws sees his distress clearly.

She jumps into the air when Michael comes back, and Dean sees another figure fall down gracefully, with a pool of blood following behind her. She’s falling faster than Castiel, which seems impossible, but Lady Justice dies before hitting the ground.

Dean’s heart almost stops, because he realizes there is no way Castiel will ever be saved.

“Cas!” Dean yells, desperately, with his hand outstretched and feet carrying him to Castiel’s falling body, but Claws extends her wings, jumps up, and flies. Even if she’s weak, she carries herself with grace, and flies toward Castiel, moving her wings as powerful as she can. Dean runs after them, down the stairs and to the place Castiel might fall, to the place where Dean might have to mourn a person he loves.

“No no no no no,” Dean chants under his breath, his throat feels hoarse. Every possible worst
outcome flies in his head like rapid fire.

Before Castiel can hit the ground, Claws catches him with her teeth, ripping up the beautiful cloak, and Castiel somehow hangs on to her, his arms going around her claws, as she plunders down a little, careful of her wounds. Michael circles the area, shouting at the people to do something and kill the traitor.

Nobody moves.

Claws goes down on the ground, setting Castiel first, and then lying down beside him, breathing heavily. The bond flickers, to Dean’s surprise, and Dean holds on to the line as if it’s a life and death situation, which feels like it more than it ever did. Dean falls down between the both of them, shaking hands clutching at Castiel’s hand, and fingers splayed on top of Claws’ head. Claws closes her eyes, going out like a light, but when Dean searches for her through the bond, he finds her hibernating. She’s healing her wounds, but her lifeline is growing thinner with every breath she takes. Claws moves, with the last of her strength, inches closer to Dean’s waiting hands, placing her head on Dean’s knees. She’s heavy, but Dean doesn’t give a fuck, because he can hear her chant one thing.


Her comatose state leaves Dean shaking, tears going down without his consent. Dean gathers Castiel in his arms, next to Claws, and weeps. Castiel’s strong arms go around his waist, clutching at Dean for dear life.

The crowd around them cheers *True King, True King, True King*, but none of that matters, because Castiel is alive. He’s alright, he *has* to be alright.

A hand lays on Dean’s shoulder, and Pleasure’s voice comes.

“Dean,” he says. “Let us take care of her.”

Dean looks up to find Pleasure and Anna standing over them, with an unfamiliar Dragossi behind them. The Dragossi is twice their size, and Dean recognizes those eyes. Samandriel’s cloudy look bears no anger, only peace and hope. His scales look rough, like they haven’t been taken care of in years, his lithe body a beautiful gray. The Storm Dragossi. Samandriel nudges Dean away from Claws, huffing some smoke out of his lungs.

Anna sits down in front of Claws, with all of her beauty in the daylight. She sings a simple tune, as she heals Claws’ wounds, her hands shine with an ethereal light of her own.

Pleasure still holds Dean’s shoulder. “Michael is gone. He flew away, with the Dragossi. Toward Zhwai.”

“I don’t care,” Dean chants. He doesn’t. His head hurts from everything he had to go through, and Claws is still hibernating, her mind connecting to his now and then, sending pieces of her dreaming.

Anna’s fingers glide over Claws’ wounds, as she’s doing her job, efficiently. Gods. Dean’s teary eyed when Castiel slowly moves to envelop Dean in his warmth. The shining coat digs into Dean’s skin. Dean has both of them close, their lifelines are safe, but somehow, Dean is still shaking. Without comment, Dean hugs him close to himself. Castiel’s arms come up around him, squeezing gently, so as not to hurt Dean further.

“I lived through the trial,” Castiel whispers.

“You did,” Dean says, still crying his heart out. “You fucking idiot, you absolutely did.”
“I’m not a Novak anymore,” Castiel whispers, only to Dean.

Dean pulls away, and grabs Castiel’s face with both of his hands, and kisses him, in front of everyone. They kiss, until Dean fits their foreheads together, and breathes harshly. “You’re a Winchester. A true Winchester, and you’ve proven yourself to the world. Rise with me, to a new tomorrow.”

And they rise, to the crowd still chanting.

*True King. True King.*

*True King.*
Dean doesn’t leave her side day or night. He accompanies Anna through every single session of healing, sleeps with Claws next to him, and when he’s awake, he watches over her, like she watched over him.

Castiel joins him, whenever he’s free from being his Right Hand. Sam reads for her. Benny brings the food over. Charlie sends notes whenever she’s able.

Right now, Dean’s petting Claws’ injured wing, feeling the way she’s breathing. Once or twice, he hears something down the line, warm bursts of happiness through their bond. This is what keeps him going. Castiel sits next to him, silent.

Dean sniffs, then clears his throat. He’s dressed in royal clothes he hates, but the Maids threw out all of his better clothing. These feel like a costume, rather than who he yearns to be.

Castiel takes his hand off Claws’ wing, and wraps it in between his own fingers, kissing Dean’s knuckles. Dean hasn’t slept in days, the black circles around his eyes deepen. “Please rest,” Castiel begs, eyes closed, cheek pressed to the back of Dean’s hand. “I’ll watch over her tonight.”

“You know I can’t,” Dean says, his voice rough, still damaged from screaming so loud. He can hear, he can taste, but he can’t speak, still. Anna’s been trying to help with that, too, but Dean refuses to direct her healing powers anywhere but at Claws. “What if she wakes up and I’m not there?”

“You’ll be there,” Castiel says. His touch always makes him melt, but this time, Dean only worries twice as hard. “It’s going to be gradual.”

“Have you ever had a Dragossi shot through the heart, and head?”

“No, but—”

“This is why I’m staying. I have to. I don’t want her to be alone.”

Castiel settles next to him, as close as possible. Their sides are touching, from legs, to shoulders. Castiel wraps Dean with so much love, it soothes Dean’s pain. With everything still whirling in his head, Dean feels surprisingly somber while Castiel is here. With the damn linen, and no shoes.

“Prince Kjell sends his regards,” Castiel says, attempting at some small talk. Dean welcomes the distraction. “Samandriel’s settled quite nicely. His scales have regrown.”

“Are the hatchlings okay?”

“Yes. Kjell has sent an elaborate explanation of how Samandriel is mothering them to death.”
Dean smiles, albeit forced. He squeezes Castiel’s hand, watching how Claws breathes, her lithe body too big for the makeshift nest inside of the Keep’s Hall. “Could never have guessed a Storm Dragossi might be into parenting.”

“You know who’s really not up to parenting a horde of Dragossi?”

“Don’t tell me Pleasure followed Samandriel all the way to Fean.”

Castiel laughs, quietly. “He did. Prince Kjell’s wildly confused as to why a Green Devil wants to stay in his Castle and pet the big stormy Dragossi.”

Claws lets out a deep growl from her lungs, startling Dean and Cas both. They stay like this, watching her moving chest, and then relax. False alarm. Hopefully. Castiel kisses the side of Dean’s jaw. “I’ll go bring Anna,” he says. “Claws needs her strength.”

Dean stops him from rising, holding his hand. He leans in, their noses touch, and Dean kisses him, once. “Thank you,” Dean says. “For everything.”

Castiel smiles against Dean’s lips, then embraces him. “I’ll be gone just a second.”

When Castiel goes through the door, Dean lies down next to Claws. The Hall looks so much better without all of the gems on the walls and the ground. Dean helped the servants and maids get them out, asked them to take whatever they could. Some of them became rich overnight, all from the crystals they brought to their family. And still, they came back.

They made a special entrance for other Dragossi in the Hall. A giant hole in the Keep was alchemically induced, with a sheer wall which helped against the cold breeze. Dean figured he’d like Claws to be with him as he’d be doing a lot of King work from now on. They had Samandriel and Jarra bring Claws here, so she’d be able to heal without other Dragossi pestering her. Some of them stayed in Fean, and some expressed a wish to be back in Jarsaki.

Dean’s throne is a thin line, but he’s gaining strength. Sam and Cas are really good at politics, which he’s thankful to no end for. Claws is breathing, but her condition isn’t changing much. Dean drags a hand down his tired face. Who would’ve thought he’d be wishing for a Dragossi to stay at his side forever?

Anna comes in, dressed in the simplest linen she could find, probably from Castiel’s wardrobe. It’s refreshing to see her out in the open, free with her hair tied into a bun on top of her head. She’s even smiling.

She leaves a kiss on Dean’s cheek, and gets to work.

It’s wonderful seeing how her magic works, when she places both of her hands on the spots she deems the worst injured. It’s a small blessing, having her at his side when she’s felt nothing but pain all those years Michael has been sitting on the throne. Dean sees the red lines on her hands, still, from the torture she went through.

“She’s getting better,” Anna says, her voice like small bells.

Dean doesn’t believe it, but he wants to. “I just want her to open her eyes and send me an image of Samandriel falling on his ass again. That was funny.”

Her hands light up in a beautiful aura, a soft blue glow, seeping into Claws’ skin. “Samandriel has always been a fine Dragossi.”
Dean’s smiling. “You saw him before he became human?”

“I helped Castiel create the bond,” she says, moving her hands up, towards the wing. “One of the main rules of fixating a Bond is a blessing from a God, or a Goddess. I made sure Castiel could make the bond happen.”

“How the hell did he make Samandriel human?”

She puffs her cheeks out. “It’s an old spell, I think,” she explains. “Just as Charlotte’s been bound to this place, Castiel found a way to bond a Dragossi soul into himself, but without the damage. Had Charlotte’s father known a person could live in a new body after a bond, Charlotte wouldn’t be suffering between life and death. Pity.”

“You like her,” Dean teases.

Anna meets his eyes, her red hair falling gracefully on top of her forehead. “I do,” she confesses. “Is it that obvious?”

“Not to her,” Dean says.

She drags her fingers over Claws’ scales, sighing contently. “I should tell her. We’d make a nice pair. A disgraced Novak Goddess, and a Bonded Archivist.”

“I’ll bless your joining.”

Anna giggles. “Thank you, Your Majesty. But please refrain from interfering with my relationships. I’ve had enough of that from Michael.”

“Of course, Anna,” Dean says, softly. “I’d never.”

She ends her healing session in a few more minutes. The silence between them is pleasant, comforting. Dean loves her like a sister, and hopes everything can work out between her and Charlie. But that’s for them to decide, not him.

“My brother is very fond of you,” Anna says, as she’s packing her things to go. “I am sure you feel the same.”

“He’s a Winchester for a reason,” Dean says. “He’s family.”

Anna smiles, again. “Make sure he knows.”

“Thank you for your advice.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll come see how Claws is doing later.”

Dean only nods. And when he’s alone, he thinks about Cas.

Claws breathes deeper, as if she’s asleep, and not half-dead. Dean’s hope never falters. He sleeps next to her that night, feeling her breathing with his hand on her chest.

***
Joel Nathigard arrives two weeks after Michael’s disappearance. There is no talk as to where Michael had gone, but Dean doesn’t care. He’s still not used to sitting in the throne where Michael used to sit, so he meets Master Joel outside of the Keep. Joel arrives with two of his Red Ruby Dragossi, one of whom is apparently Claws’ mother.

Dean ignores all of the gasps from the Guards when he greets Joel with a firm handshake. Joel’s surprise is even more evident.

Castiel stands behind Dean, silent as ever.

“Your Majesty,” Joel greets. “I wasn’t anticipating such a warm welcome.”

“Please, call me Dean,” Dean answers. “If I do remember correctly, we’re a sort of Dragossi bond-family.”

Joel looks back at Claws’ mother, sharing a secret conversation with her. “Yes, Kamil feels that her daughter chose a worthy human.”

“I do not feel worthy,” Dean says, looking down at his feet. He’s dressed in royal Winchester attire, with their official embroidery on the lapels of his collar. Castiel is wearing almost the same thing, but he’s barefoot. “I’m sorry for asking you to come here, but we do not have the capacity and medicinal knowledge about Red Rubies. Claws is really sick.”

Joel nods, and bows down to Castiel, who bows right back. “Master Novak-”

“Winchester,” Dean corrects.

“Master Winchester,” Joel says, without pausing. “I am humbled you have asked me out of all the Masters in Seratonia to help you.”

Dean has read about this. Salitian people will always feel grateful you’ve asked for their help, when there are a lot of options. They feel the need to bring gifts, be it something small, or massive, just like Master Joel is doing now. He shows Castiel the bags filled with Dragossi care packages.

They help Joel Nathigard find the Waterfall entrance, and Dean refuses to fly on one of his Red Rubies. Kamil understands, and pushes her nose into Dean’s back, urging him to go. Joel explains she wants to meet him later, with her daughter.

Castiel nods at Dean, and hops on the other Red Ruby, Velikan. Dean goes straight to Benny and his Kitchens, which operate even better than before. The cooks and maids are used to him going there to eat, and pay him no mind, except for the royal greeting.

Benny places some good old broth in front of Dean, with freshly baked bread and butter.

“If I had known you’re the Winchester kid,” Benny says, sitting in front of him with a wide smile. He’s dressed even more ridiculous than ever - his parka shines with a full rainbow, and his breeches are a bright red. “I wouldn’t have made you eat the gods-damned slob every day.”

“You’re feeding me the same thing every week, Benny.”

“Someone has to keep you to your roots, brother,” Benny hits him in his shoulder. “Well? Am I going to have to get ready for a royal wedding?”

Dean almost spits the broth out. “What?”
“You and the Master. Ain’t that’s what you’re planning?”

Dean taps the spoon on his broth bowl, then points with it at Benny. “I’m gonna marry him when I marry him. Let me get used to being a King first.”

“You’re doing a great job.”

“It’s been a few weeks, Benny,” Dean grumbles.

Benny smiles at him warmly. “Look, if you propose, tell me in advance. I’d have to make some arrangements.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Dean says. “I promise.”

“Don’t lie to me, man,” Benny retorts. “Claws shares her mind with you, she gon’ be first.”

Dean’s heart clenches, then beats faster. He eats the broth, and says, “Yeah. Hopefully.”

***

Castiel shows sits down next to Master Joel, who is checking underneath Claws’ wings. Kamil, Claws’ mother lays quietly, her head next to Claws’, whining from time to time. Joel rubs a salve into Claws’ scales with his bare hands, his magnificent beard changes color from red to violet from the starlight lighting.

“One thing I can tell you,” Joel says with his Salitian accent. “She will be alright. Whatever you’ve been doing to her is proving to be more than helpful for her to recover.”

Castiel nods. “We have a Healing Goddess who is helping a lot. Dean has been sleeping next to Claws for a week now.”

Joel smiles, kissing the edge of Claws’ nose, as per Salitian tradition. “Their bond is a strong one. I am happy King Winchester reclaimed his throne. I sold Kamil’s daughter simply to avoid a war with King Novak. Now, she is in good hands and I do not regret giving the egg away. Kamil is thankful you have taken such good care of her. I am afraid I won’t be much help now, it depends on Claws’ hibernation period. Let her heal at her own pace.”

“I cannot thank you enough for coming here on such a short notice.”

Joel sits down on his behind, and looks around the Hall. “As King Winchester has said, we are a bond-family. I shall help you whenever you need me. You have Salitia as an ally, Master Castiel.”

Dean comes in, then with a worried face and a few Guards tailing him. Joel greets him the Salitian way, bowing down from a sitting position and then drags his thumb down his nose and lips. Dean excuses the Guards and plops down to Claws, and next to Castiel.

“How is she?”

“She is going to be alright,” Joel says. “I’ve left Master Castiel books on Red Ruby care, and I did what I could do.”

“Thank you for this,” Dean whispers with his eyes closed. Castiel loves him more and more with
each second, watches pain and worry cross his face with the same feelings creating a chaos inside of his own heart. “Stay for a while. Our head chef Benny will feed you, and my brother will show you around Patheo, if you would like.”

“I shall take this offer,” Joel says, bowing again. “You are too kind. I would like to get some rest after my voyage. I beg your pardon.”

Dean asks a few Guards to show him where to go, and Joel assures them both that Kamil would like to stay with her daughter for the rest of their stay. Castiel stays where he is, his fingers touching Dean’s. Dean breathes out nervously.

“Pleasure sent a letter,” he says, giving a small smile to Castiel. “He and Prince Kjell will be in Salitia in a few months on official business. Maybe we could go and see them. Kjell’s bringing his sister with him. She’s really extraordinary.”

“Oh,” Castiel says, kissing the side of Dean’s neck. “I think you will like Salitia. We can go. Leave Sam in charge.”

Dean turns to kiss Castiel fully, with a shaky breath. “Benny wants to prepare for my official coronation.”

“It’s next week, he has plenty of time.”

“We don’t,” Dean says. “But we have tonight. I’m tired.”

Castiel’s eyes twinkle mischievously. “Should we retire early?”

Dean pets Kamil’s head, and she blinks slowly at him, as if questioning. “Will you take care of her for me?”

Kamil rolls her eyes, then huddles closer to Claws, who sends a disruptive happy thought down Dean’s line. Dean instantly feels better about this, and stands up on his feet. He misses his bed, and misses Castiel’s arms around him. They leave the Hall with Guards taking their positions, and walk down to the Dungeons. Dean refuses to sleep in the royal quarters, instead giving them to Joel Nathigard. Much preferring the cozy room of his own, he drags Castiel with him. Castiel already brought all of his things from the cold room down to Dean’s, making the living space theirs.

They’re the only ones in the Dungeon now, with Sam choosing a different room right next to the Archives. For the first time in a month, Dean feels the spark of excitement. Castiel’s hand is in his, and the heat travels fast. Dean can’t take his eyes away from Castiel now, so when Castiel opens up the door to their room, Dean tugs Castiel back. “Wait,” he says. “We’re alone.”

Castiel’s a little breathless himself, his eyes cloudy with want. “I am aware.”

Dean raises his eyebrows playfully, and says, “I’d like to bathe before sleep.”

“The baths?”

Dean pulls him along, almost running like a teenager. Every since the day Castiel and he sat in the tub full of bubbling rose water, Dean has had a very clear image of Castiel, looking at him while he kneels.

They reach the antechamber, and Castiel’s already caught onto Dean’s plan. Dean worships him like a God in the baths, and once they’re back in bed, Castiel lays on dark sheets of Jarsaki, smiling at him with nothing but true, unraveling happiness.
The night surrounds them, as Dean whispers, over, and over, and over again.

“I love you, Cas. I love you.”

***

She opens her eyes to find herself enveloped in warmth from someone she distinctly remembers. Her mother’s scent surrounds her, the feeling of safety stays as she flexes her wings. They feel stiff, her legs barely listen to her, but she tries pushing herself up. There’s a cold nose pushing into her side, helping her up, and she’s grateful for it. Releasing a small peep, Claws sits on the back of her legs; her wings hit the ceiling with a loud thump.

Everything hurts.

Recognizing her mother instantly, she whinnies, growls, and wants to jump around, but Mamma stops her with a concerned look. They smell each other, exchanging familiar sounds. Mamma takes care of her closing wounds and scars, poking at them with her nose. They move in tandem, walking in circles around each other, brushing tails every now and then to show their affection.

Once Claws is satisfied with the first meeting of her mother, she searches inside of herself, trying to tug at the glimmering light of red. It comes and goes, like a wisp of light, but she easily reels it in as if an old friend.

Dean’s worry and relief crashes into her, floods all of her senses. She has to close her eyes to grab onto his stream of happiness that she’s talking to him. Claws lies down on the cold ground again, enjoying both the fussing from Dean and her Mamma.

She can’t smell Michael here anymore. Peace thrives in the Keep, and before she succumbs to sleep, she feels Dean’s hands on her, along with Castiel’s, Anna’s, Sam’s, and Benny’s. Her nest is safe, therefore she is safe.

Claws can’t wait to soar into the sky and claim her rightful place next to Dean, but now, she needs to regain her strength. Her dreams are filled with laughter, and the sound of thunder.
Thank you for reading all of this until the very end. This story is yours as much as it is mine. I'm sorry for any typos or grammar mistakes, I'm not native english so I got no idea if the fic is alright. Oops!

Hit me up on tumblr: deanohthewriter.tumblr.com

Or on Discord, where I'm known as Aliensss
Oh man, I don't know what I did to deserve so many reads, kudos, and comments. Since DCBB has ended, I'm allowed to finally post a few time-stamps! It's Christmas, why the hell not, am I right? I've got a few planned already.

Anyway! Here's to a wonderful Holiday Season. Happy Holidays, everybody! Especially to the whole Destiel Artists United group, I love each and every one of you. You'll be seeing some porny prompts from all the members, because sharing is caring!

This time-stamp is sorta smutty. NSFW. I'm terribly sorry for all the grammar mistakes, I'll correct them later, my sweetest beta in the entire world is celebrating with her family, and I don't want to bother her until after the Holidays. I love you, darter_blue!

By the way, there's a Blade Unforgiving playlist on Spotify, if anyone wants to listen or whatever. Just type in the name, and it'll pop right up.

“Remember, the smaller Green Tree’s have to get at least two bags of the emeralds every day. The Coal Dragossi? No fire next to them, they dislike any kind of heat –“

“Yes, Master.”

“Check the Dungeon lake every day for contamination; if there’s any dirt in the water, purify it with one of the –“

“Tablets, Master?”

“Gods, stop calling me Master, it makes me feel like I’m old.”

The girl with the bright twinkly eyes smirks at Castiel. Castiel’s about ready to go off on her once again, but the look on her face shows she’s determined to make him proud. A year has passed after the day Castiel fell down the Giant, and yet he’s still worried about the small horde of Dragossi under his care. Without Samandriel, it’s been hard to go away from the Dungeon for long periods of time. With the help of Dean and his charm, Krissy practically fell into his hands, unpolished, but eager to learn. Krissy is an okay apprentice, she’s been taking care of her family Dragossi for years, plus, Claws likes her more than she does Castiel, sometimes.

There are a couple of bags in the Curtain Hall, stacked neatly one of top of another near the raggedy table. It’s weirdly clean here, now, Krissy likes organizing things, which isn’t Castiel’s forte at all. Castiel’s dressed in a simple winter parka with golden thread stitching on the lapels, the Winchester insignia peeks through on Castiel’s linen shirt.

“You are old,” Krissy says, then looks over Castiel’s shoulder to the parted curtain.
Castiel follows her gaze, and finds Dean Winchester standing there, one arm lifting up the heavy curtain, the other full with a bag of rubies, and a bag of clothing. He’s just as breathtaking in the dim lights of the Dungeon as he is sitting on the Throne on a daily basis. Ever since Samandriel’s farewell, Dean and Castiel fell into a horrible schedule. Dean traveled around Jarsaki, made treaties with individual Lords, did all of the things a royal is supposed to do, and Castiel was, well, here. Taking care of his precious Dragossi.

That doesn’t mean they haven’t been affectionate whenever they had time to spare. Every stolen kiss, touch, heart-to-heart conversation they’ve shared still lingers in Castiel’s mind, makes him dizzy with love and longing. They share a room, but rarely share a bed, due to different hours of operation.

Dean’s smile is blinding, warm to the core, and whatever Krissy says next flies over Castiel’s head.

“You ready?” Dean asks, a little out of breath. Castiel pieces everything together instantly, knowing full well Dean ran here.

Castiel doesn’t take his eyes away from Dean’s, drinking the full image in. “I think I am,” he answers.

Krissy stares at them, then raises both of her hands, and says, “I’m out. Have fun, be safe. Don’t let Claws stray into the Juviari forests, she’ll die from overeating. And please, for the love of the Gods and all that is sacred; don’t do this creepy staring thing when you’re with the King of Salitia.”

“Queen,” Dean corrects her, without sparing a glance at Krissy. “Do you want anything from the market?”

“I don’t care,” Krissy says, in her own fashion, then leaves through the curtain. Her voice echoes down the stone corridor.

Castiel doesn’t wait for her to be out of hearing range, he just steps into Dean’s space, shaking fingers tangling in Dean’s short hair. Dean seems to have the same idea as his breath ghosts on Castiel’s lips and he drops the bags, eyes closing against Castiel’s kiss, their lips fitting together roughly as if they’ve been fantasizing about it the entire day. Castiel hums into the kiss, then opens up to Dean’s tongue, feeling the heat climb up his stomach. Dean kisses just like he always does; pouring so much feeling into it, Castiel’s left with nothing else in his own head just Dean, Dean, Dean.

Dean pushes Castiel back, right up until the back of Castiel’s knees hit the table, and they’re perfectly lined up. The table underneath them creeks in agony, and with it, Castiel laughs. Dean peppers kisses down Castiel’s jaw, a smile of his own playing on his lips.

“I’m afraid the table isn’t going to last any longer,” Castiel makes note, tilting his neck for easier access to Dean’s hot kisses.

“I’ll get you a new one,” Dean says, moving his hips with Castiel’s, revealing a hard line trapped inside of his breeches. “Fuck, I’ll build a million tables for you, if you want them.”

“I don’t want any more tables,” Castiel mumbles, fingers sneaking underneath Dean’s linen, drawing the heat from Dean’s skin through his fingertips. Dean suppresses a breathy moan. “I want more of you.”

Dean lifts Castiel up on the table, and Castiel wraps his legs around Dean’s back, lining them up together perfectly. “I missed you.”

Castiel kisses him, nails digging into Dean’s back as Dean moves his hips in a way that makes
Castiel see stars. “Sometimes,” Castiel says, in between kisses. Dean’s hand finds the strings keeping Castiel’s pants together. “Sometimes I wish you were never King. Then I’d never let you get out of bed.”

Dean groans, wrapping his fingers around Castiel’s hardness, slowly enjoying the way Castiel reacts to him twisting his hand on the head. “Fuck it,” he says, mouthing at Castiel’s jaw. “Fuck all of this. I’m denouncing myself as King.”

“Are you?” Castiel asks, biting at Dean’s ear. “Just so you could be with me in bed?”

“Absolutely,” Dean says, hissing when Castiel’s hand finds Dean’s own hard cock. “Fuck, my Gods, your hands.”

Castiel slaps Dean’s hand away, then brings Dean closer with his legs, just so he can take them both in hand, stroking without shame. Dean moans, looking down at them both, watching Castiel’s fingers work. They haven’t seen each other in two weeks, to Castiel’s disappointment. But this – the heat, the feverish urgency, the weeks of waiting – this makes Castiel feel wanted.

Dean’s hands grab onto Castiel’s shoulders, he throws his head back in absolute bliss. Castiel knows this all too well. The way Dean lets himself go is one of his favorite things in this world, and despite being close himself, Castiel watches Dean breathe in, breathe out, his eyebrows scrunched together, mouth open in bliss. Dean’s fingers tighten, and he’s gone.

Castiel’s eyes remain fixated on Dean’s face, his hand works without him thinking about it, but the second Dean’s green eyes open up to find Castiel’s, Castiel’s lower abdomen tightens with pressure, Dean’s name falls from his mouth like a prayer.

Riding on a wave of pleasure, Castiel has half of his thoughts gathered together to understand Dean’s kissing him everywhere he reaches. Castiel’s hand and the front of his parka are dirty. Dean’s laugh takes Castiel back, lets him be aware of his surroundings. He likes lingering in the headspace, but now more than anything Castiel wants to be in the same space as Dean.

Dean quickly grabs some rags from one of the boxes, wipes Castiel’s fingers clean, and attempts to clean Castiel’s parka. Castiel simply looks at Dean affectionately, enjoys Dean’s fussing as much as he can before speaking.

“I missed you, too,” Castiel says.

Dean kisses him, languidly. He’s still edging on rough, a little reckless. “When can we promote Chrissy to a Dragossi Master?”

“It’s a little too early.”

Dean smiles sadly. “I’m sure she’d do fine without you. I need you more than the Dungeon does.”

Castiel cradles Dean’s face, and then kisses the tip of Dean’s nose. “As much as I’d like to spend every breathing second with you, I’m sure all of the Dragossi would burn the Keep down with Chrissy in charge.”

Dean snorts, hugging Castiel close. Castiel can’t get enough of Dean touching him, so he kind of understands Dean’s adamant request. “I couldn’t care less,” Dean says, eyes mischievous. “I’d let the whole country burn for like an hour with you, uninterrupted.”

Castiel raises an eyebrow. “You do understand we’re going to be relatively alone for three weeks in Salitia?”
“Not enough time alone,” Dean ponders, pursing his lips. Castiel laughs. “You have anything planned with Master Joel?”

“Not really,” Castiel shrugs. “I’d like this to be a vacation, I think he understands.”

“Yeah,” Dean answers, then pulls away, letting Castiel take the parka off, and get a new one from one of his bags. He knew this would happen. “I’m going to have to partake in some festivities, I think they’re going to be celebrating a national holiday once we arrive.”

“Oh?”

“It’s kind of like celebrating the whole season of winter? Salitian Gods gather round, bless people, everyone gives gifts. I didn’t have time to read about it, but Sam sort of filled me in.”

Castiel stares at Dean. “Wait. Am I allowed to join you?”

Dean breathes out. “I thought you wanted a vacation, not a business trip.”

Castiel shoves him playfully, kisses the corner of Dean’s lips. “Being with you is the vacation.”

“Oh thank fuck,” Dean mumbles. “I don’t want to be away from you, but I thought if you needed some time away from a royal setting –“

“Dean,” Castiel shuts him up with a finger on Dean’s lips. “I only agreed to go because I’m going to spend three weeks with you. We don’t get enough time together, so I’d like to make up for lost time.”

Dean grins sheepishly. “I’m not going to be able to keep my hands away from you.”

Castiel raises his eyebrows, a small smile plays on his lips. “Trust me, I’m not going to hold back. I don’t give a fuck if the Queen finds us inappropriate.”

Dean grabs the bags from the ground, then helps Castiel with his. Stops in the middle of Castiel’s sentence, grinning like a fool. Castiel loves seeing the unabashed happiness on Dean’s face, commits it to memory, just as everything else Dean does. Castiel could describe Dean’s hands in deep detail, if anyone asked. “You said fuck,” Dean says, giddy like a child.

Castiel rolls his eyes, before going through one of the passages leading to the Dungeon, where Claws is waiting for them. “It’s growing on me.”

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