The Horse-King

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Summary

When orphans Sam and Dean Winchester get jobs in Horsetown, they figure that being stable boys is just their lot in life. But when King Metatron takes a peculiar liking to an even more peculiar horse they find themselves in the middle of an intrigue they barely understand, leading to an adventure full of magic and mystery, faith and betrayal, and maybe - if they survive it - love.

Notes

Thank you to the mods of the Dean/Cas Reverse Big Bang for all the amazing work they do, and being so understanding when life was handing me lemons like they were going out of style.

Most especial thanks to my artist and DCRB partner, cloud_wolfbane, who is not only a spectacular artist, but an accomplished writer as well. She went absolutely ABOVE AND BEYOND during this challenge, creating over a dozen works of art to embed in this story. Her fantastic advice, words of encouragement, and constant flow of creativity gave me the strength to see this through. Look what you’ve done, Cloud! You created a monster! Thank
you.

Note on violence and animal abuse: I personally don't think this goes beyond the typical violence in SPN, but I figured better safe than sorry. If you need a more detailed warning, don't hesitate to contact.
Dean woke to the cottage door flying open. The bed the whole family slept in was empty but for him and Sam, so they struggled a bit to sit up out of the blankets that swamped them.

“John, it’s time,” said Mom, breathing hard. Her blond hair was falling out of her braid, several strands curling along her forehead and cheek, clinging to her face with blood. She clutched her bow in one hand, though her quiver was empty. In the other she held her sword aloft.
Dad stood from the chair where he’d fallen asleep holding his own blade. “How many?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Demons.”

For a moment, the world was quiet. The full moon shone through the window and settled on his parents’ faces, limned in silver their bright eyes and the thin lines of their mouths. Mom’s chainmail glittered on her chest. Blood dripped from her sword. Sammy wrapped a hand around Dean’s arm and dug his fingers deep. The air was thick with the weight of each second that fell.

From outside, a piercing scream.

Mom whipped around to guard the door, while Dad looked to their sons. He grabbed an arm on each of them and lifted them clean off the bed. Then he took Dean by the shoulders, and bent to peer straight into his eyes. “Take your brother and do not lose him.”

Dean tried to speak, his chest shuddering, but no sound came. Never had his Dad looked so fierce.

“Run, Dean!”

His shout shocked Dean into moving. He took Sam’s hand and bolted for the door. Mom stepped aside, only looking down at them at the last second. “Wait, take this.” In his empty hand she placed her bow. Having only seen twelve summers, it was practically as tall as him. Quickly, she gave each of them a kiss on the crowns of their heads. “I love you.”

A loud crack erupted outside, causing the earth to rumble. They all looked to the other side of the hamlet in the small valley between the hills, and a great plume of flame blossomed to the sky, like a flower unfurling at high speed.

“Mary,” said Dad.

“To Impala, now,” their mother told them. “We’re right behind you!” She pushed Dean’s shoulder, and he was running.
The bow dragged in one hand, Sam the other - at only eight summers, he could barely keep up - but Dean ran. Impala stood not far off, no tack or saddle or even a rope to speak of. She shifted uneasily on the ridge of the hill their cottage sat on, her ink-black hide lit red by the fire in the near distance. Another boom shook the ground, tripping Sam and ripping their hands apart. “Sammy!” he shouted, reaching back, but Sam wasn’t moving to get up, wasn’t even looking at him.

A figure had appeared at the top of the hill. It was hooded and cloaked, darker than the night, so that it swallowed the light and did not reflect it. Slowly it lifted a robed hand and uncurled its fist.

In the blink of an eye the figure was standing in front of Sam. Its dark cloak whirled in an unnatural breeze before settling, bringing with it a wave of foul, fetid air that reeked of sulfur. Up close Dean could see, just barely in the moonlight, runes that were woven into the cloth, black on black. “What have we here?” it asked. Large hands reached out and grasped Sam around his chest, and lifted the boy high as if he weighed nothing. The figure’s hood fell back to reveal a man, short-haired and pale-skinned, a grin stretching his mouth wide. His eyes were bright yellow.

A Demon.

King Lucifer, came the rumors from the southern border, was a great sorcerer, second only to their own King Michael. To his elite warriors he gave magic spells, which they wove into their armor and their weapons. More spells they wore in pockets and bottles and pouches, which they flung out in battle, causing mayhem and destruction wherever they fought. But Lucifer’s greatest gift, they said, was a spell that altered both body and mind, which he would breathe into them before every great battle: his warriors would become Berserker Demons who felt no pain, were imbued with a strength four times their own, and had no will but that of their lord. The concentration of sulfur in the spellwork and the great power it contained turned their eyes a glowing yellow. With Lucifer’s sorcery, a single Demon could take out an entire battalion. Or so they said.

Sam and Dean would play Demons and Reapers with the other children in the village when all their chores were done. But none of Michael’s Reapers were here to defend them now, and this Demon was oh, so very real.

Sam kicked him in the face.

The Demon dropped him, but didn’t seem angry—instead he laughed, throwing his arms wide, revealing the arsenal of spells hidden beneath his cloak. “I like you,” he said, when he recovered. He didn’t seem to care, or even notice that their parents were running toward them yelling, swords aimed at his back. Dean tried to get to Sam, but with supernatural speed the Demon crouched and pulled the kid toward him by his shirt, bringing them nose to nose. “You’ve got spunk.” His other hand dipped into his robes and came up with his forefinger and thumb pinched together. “Boo!” he said, the punch of air blowing a powder into Sam’s face.
Dean felt a horrific rage boil up inside him, shooting through his entire body before escaping it with a yell. He dropped the bow and tackled the Demon, or tried; the man easily turned and caught him by the throat. Dean gasped, his hands instinctively flying upward to pry the fingers from his neck. They may as well have been made of stone, for all they moved. Sam didn’t try to help, but was left sitting where the Demon left him, eyes hooded and body relaxed. He softly plucked the string of the bow that had fallen in his lap.

Dad screamed his own battle yell, nearly to them now, lifting his sword in the air to bring down on the Demon by his sons. Dean could see through his fading vision how he put his entire strength into the blow.

But it never fell. The sword glanced off an invisible barrier and went flying overhead. The force knocked Dad off his feet. Mom leapt over him as she arrived and tried pummeling past the barrier, but it simply crackled with miniature lightning any time she hit it. The Demon didn’t look over once. And still, he grinned. He loosened his fist a little—Dean wheezed in the moist, sulfuric air—and drew him close, flaring his nostrils and taking a big sniff. His yellow eyes narrowed into slits. “Not what I’m looking for, but there’s still something—”

Whatever it was, Dean never found out; an enormous BONG reverberated in his ears and the barrier crackled, and kept crackling. Impala roared and reared, bringing her massive hooves down on it again; this time it shattered into a thousand sparks and the Demon flung Dean aside. He’d barely stood before Impala charged and knocked him down with one gargantuan shoulder, trampling him beneath her. She skid in the grass and pivoted to charge again, but the Demon uncurled his fist, dropping a spell, and reappeared several yards away.

Neither parent glanced in their sons’ direction. Dad pulled knives out of his boots and Mom got in a ready stance with her sword; they both stared unblinking at the Demon, who struggled to stand, ripping off his cloak. Without its dark protection the moon glared fully on his half-trampled body, the skin of the lower left side of his face completely scraped away by the edge of a hoof. He started limping toward them, crushed leg dragging behind. The Demon’s yellow eyes glowed brighter and brighter, and Dean realized he was chanting under the sounds of fighting drifting up from the village. In a single, swift movement he spread his arms wide and clapped them together, and a line of flame flashed toward them, rolling in the grass like a wave, growing in size with every inch it devoured.

Hellfire. No water could put it out.

Impala roared again, like Dean had only ever heard once when seeing mustangs fighting each other out on the plains. This close it was much louder, more thunderous than the storms that swept through in the summer. It galvanized him; with a strength he barely possessed he grabbed Sam and tossed him onto Impala’s back, though his own head barely reached her middle. She wheeled and galloped
to the right; he felt a push from one of his parents behind him, and they ran after. And just in time: the wave swept past, pouring down the other side of the hill, leaving bare dirt and smoke in its wake.

“What’s the matter?” the Demon laughed, blood dripping from the bare teeth on the side of his mouth. “Don’t you know when you’ve lost?”

Dean shuddered and tore his eyes away from the grisly sight. Not a foot away from him, near the edge of where the fire had sped through, glinted his father’s sword. He pounced on it, and needed all of his might to lift and hold it steady.

“He’s playing with us,” said Mom.

“Good,” Dad answered. “It might give them time. Dean, get on Impala with Sam and ride north.”

“But I—”

“Go now!” Mom barked. “Go, Dean. And don’t look back.”

For one moment longer, he stood still, sword heavy in his hands. He barely felt the tears that spilled over, keeping his eyes wide to take in his parents for what he understood was to be the last time. His father, mouth a grim line in his dark beard, held himself with pride: a wild and dark counterpoint to his mother, who stood strong and focused as a blade point, moon making a halo out of her light hair.

The Demon limped ever closer.

Dean ripped himself away and cried out at the cracking of his heart. He didn’t let it slow him. With all the speed he could muster, he raced to where Impala had stopped her flight from the fire, and made a running leap onto her back. Not a moment too soon: Sam was listing off to the side, nearly insensate, though he still clutched their mother’s bow. Dean scrambled to secure his little brother in front of him with his sword arm, and dug his free hand into Impala’s mane. At the touch the horse took off into an immediate gallop. Dean leaned as low as he could over her neck with Sam in front of him. The tears left cold tracks on his face in the sudden wind.

“COME BACK, LITTLE BOYS!”
Dean gasped at the sound. “Don’t look back, don’t look back,” he repeated desperately.

He could hear his parents yelling, the clash of blade on blade, the gritty magic words the Demon spit out. The sounds faded as Impala hit the bottom of the hill and started making an arc around their village, where every house burned and people moved in silhouettes of dark shadow from flame to flame.

“I said where are you GOING!”

The Demon right behind them! Impossible—!

Dean looked back.

He must have appeared right behind Impala, his arm still outstretched as if to grab her tail. Mom and Dad were both wrapped around him, trying to bring him down; Mom had lost her sword and was attempting a headlock; Dad was digging a knife between the ribs Impala had crushed. Even as Dean watched, the Demon flickered out with his parents, and flashed closer again, just out of reach, and too close to the hamlet’s Hellfire: a single spark jumped and landed on Mom, whose clothing immediately went up in flame. She screamed but didn’t let go.

Impala got farther away this time, village left in her dust, but again the knot the three fighters were tangled in disappeared and jumped closer. Still too short. But now Dad had caught fire too, though the Demon did not. Yet they stabbed him, and kicked him, and once more disappeared.

Reappeared.

Impala’s tail an inch away from the fire that engulfed Dean’s parents, melting chainmail into their flesh.

The last, the true last he ever saw of them, his mother hooked her burning fingers and gouged the Demon right in his yellow eyes, just as his father forced his knife and forearm all the way up the Demon’s ribcage, straight to the heart.

The Demon staggered, but did not disappear. The Hellfire that licked them grew monstrous in size and finally, finally caught the Demon too. The three of them seemed as one, now, as they collapsed in a heap. A single bonfire alone on the plain.
Dean looked back ahead.

Impala galloped away.
As Royal Stablemaster, Bobby was not often away from the royal horses. Not that he didn’t like the horses; he liked their company just fine. It was everything that surrounded the position that drove him nuts. The Royal Horsemaster, Gadreel, in charge of training the horses was stiff, though ultimately tolerable. But the knights were around the stables just as often, with their noble titles and upturned noses they pretended couldn’t smell the manure. Their poor attitudes inevitably trickled down to the squires and pages who served them, who became snotty little shits, but may the gods help him if His Majesty decided to take a tour. King Metatron had taken an especial interest in the stables, of late, and damned if Bobby knew why. Nobles were often eccentric without reason (though if Bobby had to take a stab, it was from having too much money and time on their hands). Black stallions were all he cared about, not that he was asking Bobby to breed them from the large livery His Majesty owned, oh no. He wanted new ones, fresh ones, apparently, as if Bobby hadn’t turned the kingdom’s breeding program into the envy of the entire continent. And Metatron was offering a handsome reward for the best specimens, too.

The result of it was that bumbling idjits up and down the land were stalking bands of mustangs without knowing a damn thing about horses, and getting injured, even killed for their troubles. The crueler - and ever so slightly smarter - of them were wandering the towns and hamlets like marauders looking to steal horses from those unable to defend themselves. It was an unnecessary new scourge to burden the country, which only recently felt settled again after the war. Bobby could grudgingly admit he was grateful that Metatron had been able to negotiate an armistice after King Michael’s death, and Lucifer’s grievous injury. But if Bobby knew about all the crime being committed within their own borders in the current king’s name, then there was no way Metatron didn’t. So why did he let it continue? The king did act nicely toward everyone, as far as Bobby could tell, but there was just something about the way he seemed a little too pleased by the subservience of his subjects.

Then again, he was a king. He’s probably entitled. Not like Michael never expected the same from
his people, may the gods rest his soul.

It was only times like these, staring into the last of his beer tucked into a cozy corner of The Roadhouse Tavern, that Bobby let his thoughts stray to poor young Castiel. For the news to reach Mt. Heaven that the king and queen had both died in battle was awful enough, but the way the royal household had been betrayed in the very moment of their weakness was a wound that was still deeply felt by all. Crowley, royal advisor and Prince Castiel’s personal tutor, turned out to have been a spy all along. There was a struggle in the study - Bobby had seen the aftermath: overturned furniture, knocked over shelves, broken glass and crusted powders and spilled potions burning through wood and stone alike - but they had both disappeared. It had only seemed to confirm the rumors from the frontlines that Demons, especially the yellow-eyed Berserkers, kidnapped children. Having seen fifteen summers Castiel had been on the cusp of becoming a man. Apparently young enough yet to kidnap instead of kill.

Bobby didn’t know what was the worse fate.

He had not known Castiel well, especially as he grew older and dove headfirst into his studies, but as a child he’d been sent by his father to the stables to learn how to ride as any royal should. Besides, as an inheritor of the magic inherent in the royal bloodline, he could be powerful enough to live as many centuries as his father, or the rumored millennia of his grandfather, Charles. Unnaturally long life was a great burden to bear, but it came with the responsibility of leadership as ordained by the gods, and gave them the time to become the master of many crafts. Becoming a horsemaster was not out of the question. While he didn’t get to teach the little Prince to ride, he had had the honor of showing him how to care for a horse once you’re done riding them. Bobby remembered how small he’d looked next to the horses, both the war horses and the big draft animals used for labor. Just a pale little boy with wild dark hair, and big blue eyes that hung on to Bobby’s every movement. He used let him clamber up to sit on the edge of the stalls, and spoil the horses by feeding them juicy red apples. He’d giggle at the feel of the horse’s lips on his little hand, grinning so big his eyes would scrunch up. And always - Bobby tried to ignore the pang in his heart at the memory - he’d look to Bobby to see if he were smiling too, as if he’d wanted nothing more than to share his joy. People who understand that animals aren’t objects, have souls of their own, they’re good people. And if a horse likes you in their turn, trusts you to care for them and feed them, well…you’re a good egg.

Castiel had been a good egg.

Bobby lifted his mug in silent tribute to the kid, wherever he was now. He drained it and slammed it back on the rickety little table with a sigh.

Pondering a refill, he let his gaze wander around the little tavern. Ellen and her daughter Jo kept a good business. The little inn sat along the road to the capital, just about a day’s ride to the south, which was perfect for those looking for somewhere to rest on their journey. Mt. Heaven stood like a sentinel on the plains, a massive butte rising thousands of feet into the air, a chalky monolith against
green ground and blue sky. If you were traveling west, it heralded the badlands that would appear in a few more miles, which bled into the foothills of the great Micharim Mountains, the western border of Michaeretz. From the Roadhouse you could just see the top of the highest towers of the castle, shining like a beacon on the western horizon. But Bobby was here to forget about all that.

He was here for the coziness of the tavern: the firm, dirt floor with its scattering of straw, the fire crackling merrily and warm, the rough-hewn chairs and tables made by Bill, Ellen’s late husband, who’d died in the Border War. He was mostly here for the beer—no one brewed better beer than Ellen Harvelle—but her food wasn’t bad, either. The Roadhouse was doing well, and it was a nice thing to see. Ellen was kept busy pouring beer and stirring stew, while her only daughter Jo acted as a runner, serving those who needed refills. She couldn’t have seen more than ten summers, so it was pretty impressive to see her run up to him with a large pitcher clutched in her hands and a big, gap-toothed smile.

“Thanks, kid,” he said, lifting the pitcher and refilling his mug. He hand it back to her, but not before slipping her a small coin on the sly. Jo left his table with a satisfied look—he knew she was attentive to him because he tipped her better than he should.

Still, Ellen was always aware who needed serving, and was just as likely to send Jo along if she didn’t take the initiative herself. He tried to catch her eye at the bar to nod his thanks, but she was deep in conversation with a kid. Not quite a kid, Bobby reassessed after a longer look. His head was over the bar, at least, and he held his shoulders with confidence and pride. On his back was strapped a sword so long that he wouldn’t have been able to wear it around his waist. It was clearly an adult’s weapon, and Bobby wondered how he came by it. The boy was gesticulating a lot with one of his hands, and the other clutched the hand of a smaller boy, maybe Jo’s age, who was curiously taking in the tavern. Even stranger was how the little boy was carrying a bow taller than he was, the string of it strung across his chest. Bobby couldn’t really hear what was being said—a rowdy group of men were stumbling drunkenly toward the door to stagger home—but he could see the instant Ellen softened around the edges. She was a canny woman, not easily taken in, so she must believe whatever story the boy was feeding her. She was just shaking his hand like they’d agreed on a deal when a horse whinnied in alarm from out front.

It was loud enough to pierce the tavern’s chatter, but as it was likely in response to the men who’d left getting into some kind of fistfight outside, Bobby ignored it. So did the rest of the tavern, except for the boys. “Stay here, Sammy,” commanded the older boy, his voice sharp in the momentary quiet. He raced to the door, and the littler boy, Sammy, didn’t waste a moment to disobey, chasing right on his heels.

Bobby didn’t like the idea of those boys getting in the middle of whatever was going on outside, especially carrying those weapons they had no business carrying. There was no telling what a bunch of drunks with the impaired judgment would get up to. Besides, Ellen hated disorder on her property and was already rounding the side of the bar herself. Taking a fortifying gulp of his beer, Bobby stood and waved her off. “I’ll handle it,” he said. The horse neighed again, though it sounded a little mean this time, a little angry.
When he opened the door, it only took him a split second to realize what was going on. In addition to a big sword and a big bow, those boys must have come into town with a big horse, too. A big black one, in fact. And those drunk idjits were looking to steal it away to earn a little cash in the capital. One of them was even trying to lift himself onto the horse’s back, but it was having none of it. The boys weren’t, either, though a horse that size was more than capable of defending itself. The older one was trying to wrestle one of the men to the ground, to some surprising success, and the little one had pulled a knife from nowhere and was feinting toward another, who roared with laughter and tried to strike the kid.

Bobby saw red.

“Get the hell out of here!” he shouted. He was onto those drunkards like a charging bull, dragging away the one who’d almost nailed the little boy with his fist, and acquainted him with his own knuckles. The man went down like a sack of potatoes. At the same time the horse landed a kick on the one trying to mount it, and he screamed in agony. But the other three had ganged up on the older boy who, though he was scrapping like a viper, was losing and taking hard hits. One of the drunks just about had a handle on the sword and was trying to pull it from its sheath. Bobby went for him first, wrapping an arm around his neck and slamming his other hand down on his wrist, twisting it away from the weapon. Another man yelled in pain—Bobby saw a shape flit in his periphery, and figured little Sammy had gotten a stab in—but then the tavern door was bursting open again.

“Stop this right now!” said Ellen, but the drunkards were beyond reason. She came over to where the other men were still ganging up on the boy, swinging a large club, and brought it down on one of them.

“Fuck!” he shrieked, finally backing off. Between Ellen’s club, Bobby’s fists, and—he had to give it to the kid—the older boy who just would not stay down, the men gave up the fight.

“Y’all ain’t welcome here anymore. And take your friend with you,” spat Ellen, toeing the idjit Bobby’d punched first, barely conscious on the ground. Grudgingly a couple of the men lifted him up and they stumbled away together. “Now go on, get!” She slapped the club into her hand.

They stumbled a little faster.

When she was certain they weren’t going to have another go, she turned the full of her attention on the strange boys. The younger one was clutching the other boy’s hand again, whose nose and mouth were both dripping blood. “Don’t you boys know it’s asking for trouble leaving a black horse out in the open like this?”
Little Sammy shrunk closer to his companion. The older boy didn’t quite have the art to hide his confusion, but Bobby could see the gates slamming shut. The last thing he wanted was for these hurt, vulnerable boys to be driven off. Especially since their horse was sticking its face down between the two of them, for all the world like it was checking on them. As if it was taking no conscious thought, both boys brought a hand up to pat its nose.

“Ellen,” he said.

“Yeah, alright, Bobby,” she answered. She was already softening up again. “Take them round back and I’ll bring some stuff out. Joanna Beth!” she shouted as she turned back toward the tavern, where patrons were leaning out the door to watch the spectacle—Jo standing right in front. Her daughter was the only person in the world who wasn’t intimidated by her mother, even when wielding her club. She just grinned cheekily up at her. “You know better than to get near fights. Everybody back inside, show’s over.”
Bobby waited for to finish herding them in, then threw a thumb over his shoulder. “Ellen’s got a nice set up for horses out back. Come on.”

The older boy clenched his jaw, unmoving.

“I think you said that’s Sammy,” Bobby continued, pointing to the smaller boy. “What’s your name?”

The kid looked away. Definitely a flight risk.

“It really is best to get that beautiful horse out of sight. He’s big and mean but let’s not take chances, huh?”

The boy’s head whipped back around. “She. Why does it matter?”

That hulking thing, a she? Couldn’t be right. “The prize money out on black horses, of course. Up to 10,000 crowns, if it pleases the king.”

Bobby watched the kid’s face carefully in the lantern light swinging outside the tavern door. Clearly the boys were down on their luck, and the sound of that much money would leave any horse owner having second thoughts. But he just frowned, and tucked himself closer under the horse’s neck. Sammy’s eyes went wide in fear and he tugged urgently on the bigger boy’s hand.

The boy sighed. “Dean,” he said at last. “Name’s Dean. Where’s this set up for horses?”

“Nice to meet you boys; I’m Bobby. Follow me.” He led them around the side of the tavern. The building was already on the outskirts of the little town, but Ellen’s barn and gardens were set back even further north, close to the banks of the Reka River. A large fence surrounded the property that wasn’t the acres being tilled, to discourage people with sticky fingers. It hadn’t always been that way, but the desperate times after the Border War had made it a practical addition. Even a couple of years later, things were still desperate for some, if Dean and Sammy were any indication.

Jo had already run ahead at her mother’s bidding, and was waiting to let them into the gate. The only light was coming from a lantern she was holding, but the moon was mostly full and Bobby knew the
way well, after years of being friends with the Harvelles. The boys followed along with their horse, though Bobby was surprised they weren’t using a rope or halter of any kind. Jo unlocked the gate when they were close and shoved it open. They stepped inside and Bobby led them past the garden and the chicken coop and toward the barn. After clanging the gate shut behind them, Jo ran ahead again to unlock the barn doors. Then she flit from lantern to lantern, lighting the inside.

The Harvelle barn was modest, but well made. The stalls were few but spaces, a couple holding some dairy cows, and a couple had sheep and goats already settling down for the night. One of them bleated a question at the intruders. The other side of the barn had empty stalls for any guests deciding to stay at the inn. Bobby’s own horse, Rumsfeld, nickered a small greeting. He was a retired workhorse, but still hearty. His hide was a rich dark brown and his shoulders wide and stocky. He was one of the strongest horses Bobby had ever raised, too.

The black horse dwarfed him.

“Pick the stall you like,” said Jo. “We’ll feed your horse and then you can come back to the inn.”

“No,” said Dean. “If people are coming after Impala then I’m staying with her.”

Jo shrugged. “Suit yourself. You?” she asked Sammy. He shook his head vigorously.

“Why don’t you run along back to your mom and tell her the boys are staying here,” said Bobby. “I’ll help them with the feed.”

“Whatever,” she said. Jo turned and without a backward glance, ran under Impala’s belly without even having to duck her head. The darkness swallowed her up, and soon it was just her lantern bobbing away into the distance.

Now that the barn was fully lit, he took a good look at the little ragtag group. The boys were both thin, thinner than they should be. The flickering lanterns cast deep shadows, highlighting the hollows of their cheeks, the obvious bumps of their bones in their collars and hands. What color their pale skin had came from spending more days than not out in the sun rather than health; Dean looked like he might have a generous helping of freckles under the blood and the dirt. They both had big light-colored eyes, which Bobby figured made them brothers. That conclusion was strengthened when he saw Sam was a bit less gaunt than Dean, who was probably giving him the lion’s share of the food he earned. Their malnourishment made Bobby reassess their ages; Dean could possibly be an early teenager who hadn’t hit his growth spurt yet. Little Sammy was maybe Jo’s age.
As for the horse, he couldn’t help but be impressed by the sheer size of her. No signs of deprivation, there, since the whole prairie was her buffet. She was 18 hands at least, at the withers, if not more, the sort of height only draft horses can reach. But she didn’t have the stockiness of a draft horse, but was built for speed. Her mane and tail were long and unbraided, her forelock dashingly flopped down her forehead, and with her noble stance overall gave an impression of great strength tempered with exceeding elegance. Making her even more intriguing was her coloring: from nose to tail nothing but the purest black, neither star nor stocking to mar it. Bobby was good at what he did but he didn’t think he could ever have bred such a horse into being, even if he lived longer than a sorcerer. If those men had succeeded, they would have fetched a pretty penny for her, mare or not. Because a stallion of that size was something, but a mare? Something else.

“Are you sure that’s not a gelding?” he asked.

Dean snorted, but Sam huffed. “She’s not Gelding, she’s Impala!”

“No, Sam, a gelding is when they chop off a stallion’s nuts so they grow bigger, like oxen.” Dean rolled his eyes. “What, you wanna lift her tail?” he asked Bobby.

Bobby chuckled at the horrified look on Sam’s face. “Nah. Let’s get her taken care of, and you.”

“I’m fine,” said Dean, wiping his face off with his dirty sleeve. It mostly smeared the blood around.

“Sure,” he said, unwilling to argue. One thing at a time. He carefully stepped around Impala, not wanting to startle her, and grabbed a bucket from the corner. She followed him with her head. “Now Sam, there’s a well out the barn to the right. Wanna get her some water?” Sam looked up at his brother, who gave him a nod. Sammy unslung the large bow from his shoulder and leaned it against the wall. Then he took the bucket and scampered out the door. “And Dean, why don’t you get her in a stall while I pitch over some hay?”

“I’d rather groom her first. Do you have a brush?” It looked like it took him a lot to ask for help, but he was going to power through for the sake of his horse’s comfort.

Bobby smiled to himself, though the kid had no idea what he was asking. Did the Royal Stablemaster have a brush indeed.

The kid mistook his amusement and blushed, looking away. “It’s been a while,” he muttered, wrapping an arm around one of Impala’s forelegs.
“I’d never make fun of you for wanting to take care of your horse,” Bobby assured him. “It’s the least we can do for ‘em.” Dean loosened up a bit. “I have some supplies you can use, but I’m sure Impala would appreciate a bath in the river tomorrow to get her all clean first, don’t you?”

“I guess,” he said.

Just then, Sam came tottering back in with the large bucket, full to the brim. Bobby helped him lift it onto a hook in the nearest stall, while Dean took their meager belongings from Impala’s back. Docilely, as if she hadn’t crippled a man ten minutes before, Impala walked into the stall with no prompting and stuck her nose right in the bucket. As she drank, Dean took Sam’s bow and put it in the far corner of the stall. He took the sword off from his back and set it there, too, so that anyone who might want it would have to get past their enormous horse first.

Smart kid.

With surprising strength, Sam hoisted himself onto the stable wall near Impala’s head and started picking apart the knots in her mane. With the barest of touches on her flank to let Impala know he was there, Dean knelt by her hind legs and lifted one massive hoof from the ground. Bobby watched in some astonishment how, despite not having any tools at his disposal, he made sure it was clean and healthy. Kid really did know his way around horses.

Bobby left them to it, going over to the pile of hay and wheelbarrow sitting in the back of the barn. He pitched a few forkfuls in the barrow. By the time he wheeled it back to Impala’s stall, Dean was done with his hoof inspection and helped Bobby put the hay in Impala’s trough. No sooner had they finished than Jo appeared again in the barndoors, Ellen on her heels. “I bet you boys are hungry,” she said.

Sam stayed on his perch and Dean shifted awkwardly, eyeing the cloth-covered baskets the girls were holding. “We’re not looking for charity. I said I would work and I will.”

“This ain’t charity,” she retorted. “There will be plenty of time for milking and mucking tomorrow. I have to worry about you taking off before helping with morning chores?”

“No ma’am,” he said, standing a little straighter. Yeah, Ellen had that effect on people.

“Good. Grab some of those empty barrels stacked back there and let’s eat.”
“Tavern closed?” Bobby asked, as he and the boys did as instructed. Sam knocked a barrel over with enthusiasm and laughed, rolling it back at high speed like it was a new toy to play with. One of the cows grumbled its displeasure at the noise. Rumsfeld snorted.

“Yep,” Ellen said. “Closed the bar and you three are the only guests for the night, so here we are.” She set Sam’s barrel upright, smiling her thanks, and set her basket down.

Dean rolled his up meekly behind. “Sorry I’m forcing you to eat out here, ma’am. It’s just… Impala…And I…”

Ellen melted like butter. Of course for a tough woman like her it wouldn’t look like much to an outsider, but Bobby hadn’t seen her this soft toward a stranger since Bill had died. “What,” she said, “you think I wasn’t born in a barn?”

Her delivery was so straight it took the poor kid a moment, then his eyes widened. Laughter bubbled out of Dean, loud in the night. He slapped his hands over his mouth, but there was no taking it back. Sam started laughing too, then Jo was laughing, and Ellen and Bobby smiled to hear them.

“The food’s already here, so here’s where we’re gonna eat. Now just one more thing.”

“Mom, no!” Jo whined.

“Yes, Jo. Go grab some water from the well so everyone can wash up. Take Sam with you.”

“Ugh,” she said. “Come on.” She waved Sam over, picked up a bucket and handed him another, and the two pattered out on their bare feet.

When they were out of sight, Ellen raised her eyebrows at Bobby. “You want to tell him, or should I?”

Bobby saw Dean snap tense, eyes darting around for all the world like a spooked rabbit. To calm him, he draped an arm over Rumsfeld’s stall door and leaned against it, relaxed. “You’ve done nothing wrong, boy. What she’s getting at is your horse.”
“What about her?” Dean asked, defensive. He’d ended up on the opposite side of the barrels as Impala’s stall, and he looked a second away from vaulting them to get to her.

“That prize money I told you about? People are murdering to get their hands on nags, they’re that greedy for it. And your horse is the finest I’ve ever seen.”

Dean crossed his arms. “So?”

“So I work with horses for a living, and I’ve never seen anything like her. What happened outside the Roadhouse today is going to keep happening, son.”

Dean held eye contact another moment, then glanced over to Ellen.

“It’s true,” she said. “Most folk who own black horses have either already sold them on, or are throwing dirt and whitewash on them to hide their coloring. You really haven’t heard about any of this?”

Dean shrugged, and looked at the ground, scuffing his bare toe in the dirt. “We don’t go into towns, much.”

Bobby felt that pang in his heart all over again. “You must be used to taking care of yourself, and your brother,” he said, treading as lightly as he knew how.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Your parents?”

“The War.”

Ellen smiled a sad smile, and tugged the boy into her arms. “My Bill, too,” she whispered. Dean kept his arms crossed, but after a moment he sagged into the embrace. Bobby swallowed and looked away, blinking his eyes, thinking of his Karen. The Border War had taken so many.
They could hear Sam and Jo making their way back, the latter chattering on to her new friend about the garden. Dean stepped back and wiped his face with his sleeve again, smearing everything around a little more.

“Thank you, Jo,” said Ellen, “and thank you, Sam. I’ll take that.” She took Sam’s bucket and sat down on one of the barrels, then pulled another one right in front of her. “Dean, you sit here. The rest of you wash up. You, too, Bobby.”

He did as he was told, getting his hands in the other bucket between the kids splashing each other, thinking they were being sneaky about it. Ellen pulled a clean cloth from one of the baskets and started cleaning Dean’s face. Kid looked like he wanted to argue, but wisely kept his mouth shut. With his skin actually cleaning up a bit, it was a relief to see that his nose had stopped bleeding, and his lip nearly so. He was going to have one hell of a shiner, though. And yet he was barely flinching at Ellen’s touch, even when she grasped his chin to move his head around. Dean was used to pain, no mistake.

“Can we eat yet?” asked Jo. Sam stood next to her with wide puppy eyes. They were both more soaked than a simple hand and face washing warranted.

Ellen, like Bobby, pretended not to notice. “Alright, unpack the baskets.”

The kids cheered and Jo flipped the cloth over the closest basket, Sam peering in at her shoulder. She took out a clean cloth and set it over one of the barrels, and then began loading up. There was cheese, large hunks of a couple different kinds, a fresh loaf of bread, and a large covered pot. When she lifted the cover wisps of steam curled toward the rafters: the last of tonight’s beef and vegetable stew.

Dean’s stomach growled so loud they all heard it. He ducked his head, a blush flushing his freckled cheeks, but Ellen just smiled. “Pull up a barrel, Bobby, and help me hand out the dishes.” Sure enough, the rest of her basket was filled with bowls, spoons, cups, and a single stoppered jug. She filled the bowls with the stew one at a time, which Bobby handed to the kids each in their turn. Sam and Jo were tiny enough to share a barrel, elbowing each other as they wolfed down their dinner. For the first few bites Dean seemed to be trying to control himself, but eventually gave in, stuffing his mouth with hunks of bread between spoonfuls. Ellen and Bobby ate with more manners, but neither of them were dainty so they weren’t setting much of an example, anyway. Ellen didn’t admonish Jo, even when she laughed so hard she spilled some stew on her dress.

The food was gone in no time—Bobby was certain Sam and Dean could have eaten three times as much—so Ellen unstoppered the jug and poured a generous amount in each cup. It turned out to be a
kind of berry cordial, sweet but not too sweet, perfect to wash down the meal. She really was soft for these boys. “And one more thing,” she said. Reaching into her basket once more, she pulled out a large juicy carrot. “Do you think Impala would like a treat, too?” It was a treat in itself to see Dean’s face light up the way it did, like there was still some child left in him. He set the rest of his cordial down, forgotten, and went right over to his horse to feed her. She crunched down on it immediately, while Dean pet her in delight.

Rumsfeld hung his head over his stall and watched her eat. He snorted and gave Bobby the stink-eye. Ellen laughed. “I didn’t forget you, you big lug.” She handed Bobby another carrot.

“You’re a gem,” he said.

She winked. “So they tell me.”

He hauled himself up off his barrel, finished off his cordial, and went to Rumsfeld. “There you go,” he murmured, as the horse took his due.

There wasn’t much better, Bobby felt, than standing in a barn, with the scent of animals and hay sweet in your nose, a full belly, good company, and the laughter of children. All five of them had been broken by hardship, and grief, and life sure wasn’t going to get easier. But tonight was good. Tonight, they could have peace.

Until Jo elbowed Sam to get his attention. “Hey, can I see your knife?” she asked.

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By habit, Bobby was an early riser. As stablemaster at such a large stable, there were plenty of grooms and pages he had to rouse out of bed. Plenty of chores needed to get done before the knights came out to train with their steeds, or servants and citizens looking for a horse to help them with the day’s work. Bobby didn’t mind keeping busy, though. Too many thoughts can encroach upon you in the dark.

The window of Bobby’s little room on top of the tavern looked to the north. He opened it to breathe in some fresh air, and felt the cool bite of early autumn. The sun hadn’t quite hit the horizon yet, but the sky was brightening into a lighter blue. The barn was just starting to cast a shadow, a little ways away, and the cocks were crowing from the coop. The Reka River, not far beyond the garden, could just be heard over the early morning birdsong. Bobby only let himself enjoy it for a minute longer,
though. He hurried through his morning ablutions, got dressed, and hustled down the stairs. Usually he wasn’t opposed to having a bit of breakfast before going out to see to the horses, but today he was eager to go out to the barn.

He just really wanted to check on the boys, he had to admit.

When he came down the creaky, narrow staircase he could already hear Ellen working in the kitchen. When he peeked inside she was kneading the day’s first batch of bread dough, and sleep still hung about the edges of her eyes and mouth. “Morning,” he said.

“Morning, Bobby,” she answered. “Jo’s asleep. Mind telling the boys they can get started letting the animals out to pasture?”

“Sure thing.”

He left through the kitchen out the back door. The morning was as crisp as his first breath had promised, though now the horizon was just gaining some pink and orange. The grass was wet with dew and faintly from the town you could hear the rest of the world waking. Ellen’s cows lowed softly as the sheep and goats started their daily conversation. In fact…yes, Bobby could see: the barn door was already open.

He picked up the pace. He didn’t think, wouldn’t have thought the boys would leave, but—

When he walked inside, for a moment his fears came to be. Impala’s stall was open and empty, and Bobby’s saddle bag hanging on the other side of Rumsfeld was carelessly left open, something Bobby would never do. His heart crawled up his throat. They couldn’t have—

As he strode past the open stall to get to his bag, he stopped. There, curled on top of a pile of hay and half-smothered in an old saddle blanket, Sam slept.

Bobby held his breath, hoping it wasn’t just wishful thinking. He peeked a little further into the stall, and saw all the brothers’ things were still in the corner. And now that he was paying more attention, he noticed that Rumsfeld was already munching on his breakfast. He opened his bag, and understood: all of his grooming tools were gone.

Somewhat dumbfounded, Bobby let the other animals out to pasture himself, opening their stall
doors and letting them wander out of the barn and beyond the open fence. He ambled after them, going around the outside of the barn to the back gate. There he finally found Dean and Impala, standing close to the bank of the Reka. The early sunlight caused her newly washed coat to shine, making her look more magnificent than she had last night. Dean, barely as tall as one of her legs, was keeping up a steady stream of chatter as he brushed her shoulder. “Gonna get you looking pretty again, Baby,” he thought he heard. As soon as Bobby started walking closer, Impala swung her head to look at him, and gave a little blow of her lips.

Dean turned around and blanched. He fiddled with the brush in his hand until Bobby got within easy talking distance. “I’m sorry,” he rushed, “I thought I’d be done before you got up and I know Ellen has chores for me to do but I really needed to take care of Impala first and you said it was okay to use your brushes and—”

“It’s alright, kid,” he said. He nodded to the pile of tools on the ground. “You know how to use all of those?”

Seeing he wasn’t in trouble, Dean loosened up. “Tch, obviously.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Bobby, crossing his arms and feigning disbelief. “Show me.”

Dean threw his shoulders back, and showed him.

By the time he was done telling Bobby the finer points of getting tangles out of a horse’s tail, Sam and Jo were up and feeding the chickens, by the sound of it.

Bobby stroked his beard. “Whelp,” he said, “your parents taught you well, Dean.”

Dean shrugged and avoided his eyes, setting the comb with the other tools.

“Does Sam know all that, too?”

“Yeah. I mean, he can’t reach everywhere on Impala like I can. I couldn’t always either, though, so I’d lift Sam onto her back and he’d brush her from there, and…” He trailed off, rubbing the back of his head and looking in to the distance, blushing.
“That’s impressive.” Dean shrugged again. Bobby took a deep breath. “You know I told you I work with horses for a living, but I didn’t tell you where.” Dean looked back at him. “I work at the royal stables.”

An odd series of expressions flit across Dean’s face, too fast for Bobby to parse them. But there was no doubt it hardened into suspicion and defiance. “I’m not selling her,” he said. “Impala’s my family, just like Sam.”

“I’m not asking you to sell her, boy,” said Bobby, exasperated. “I can see you love her, plain as day. I’m asking you to come with her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean people are going to be dogging you all across the country once word gets around about your horse. She ain’t easily forgotten, you understand? So beat them to the punch and bring her yourself. The king prefers stallions but he won’t turn her away. She’ll make a fine addition to his stables. And since you don’t want to leave her, then you can take a job in those stables.”

“A, a job?”

“Well, you clearly know how to groom a horse,” he said, gesturing to Impala. She stood patiently as Dean clutched a hank of her mane in agitation, but had her eyes on Sam and Jo where they were now chasing the poor sheep around the pasture, not unlike a dam keeping track of her foolhardy foals. “You and Sam can be the new stable boys. With all these new horses we’re getting, we could use a couple extra hands.”

“What if they take her away from me? Or they say they’ll let us stay, but then they won’t?” Bobby could see the longing in Dean’s eyes, like he wanted to believe it was that easy, but just couldn’t.

It just made Bobby more determined. “No one’s going to take her away from you. And you’ll stay because I say so. Listen to me, Dean,” he said, and waited until the boy met his gaze. “I didn’t say it’s all going to be sunshine. It’s going to be hard work, dawn to dusk. But there will be three squares a day, and a roof over your head every night. For you. For your brother.”

There were twin shrieks of laughter, and they looked over to see Jo rolling around on the ground, and Sam laughing so hard he was clutching his sides.
Dean mumbled something.

“What’s that?”

“I said, I’ll think about it.”

“Okay,” said Bobby agreeably. “I was planning to leave here in two hours.” A bald-faced lie: yesterday, he’d been planning to leave at dawn. But this was worth the wait. “That should give you enough time to do the work you promised Ellen. Talk things over with Sam. By the time I saddle up Rumsfeld, let me know what you decide. Here, take this.” He took a double crown out of his pocket, an old one of Queen Hannah in double profile: facing one way as a woman, and another as a man. He’s not sure why he never had it melted and reforged into the crowns with Metatron’s likeness. It just reminded him of better times, before the war. Now he was grateful, because whether or not the boys decided to come with him, they’d have a little something to help them get by.

Dean’s eyes bulged as he dropped the gold into his hands. “But I haven’t done anything yet!”

“Think of it as a show of faith.”

Dean gave the barest of nods.

Bobby went back to the tavern for his breakfast.

And two hours later, when he entered the barn, the boys were already packed and waiting.

Bobby did his best not to smile.

“Impala doesn’t take the yoke,” Dean said.

“No one in their right mind would put a creature like Impala under the yoke. She’ll be a breeder, most likely.”

Both boys made a face. “You can’t force her.”
“Do I look like an idjit to you?” Bobby snorted. “She can pick her own studs, you have my word.”

“Okay. Fine.” Dean lifted his chin. “Then I accept your job offer.”

“I accept your job offer!” Sam echoed.

Bobby shook each of their hands. “Glad to have you, Mr. and Mr.—what’s your family name?” The boys looked at each other, then shook their heads at Bobby. “Where are you from, then? Originally?”

“Winchester, to the southwest,” said Dean.

“I know it.” That region had taken the brunt of the Luciterran army at the start of the Border War. No wonder the boys ended up as they did. But they would have better, now.

Bobby would see to it.

“Well, Sam and Dean Winchester,” he said. “Welcome aboard.”
In truth what most Michaeretzers thought of as the royal stables were at the top of Mt. Heaven on the castle grounds, its architecture grand enough to be a palace itself. It was made of white stone except for the dark ones laid carefully into the floor in curling abstract mosaics. The aisles were wide enough for four horses to be led abreast, and arched into large vaulted ceilings, where the clip of horses’ hooves echoed pleasingly to the ear. This stable housed 50 of the royal horses: the official teams for each coach and carriage, lovely riding horses for the most favored nobles of the court, the swift steeds for royal messages and decrees, and the few needed to help with chores around the castle grounds. They were, to a one, handpicked by Royal Horsemaster Gadreel to prove that the livery of the kingdom of Michaeretz was the best on the continent. It was in their land, after all, in which the horse was most at home, whether in the wild or no. This royal stable was built to inspire pride in the citizens, and envy in the visitors.

But space was at a premium on the butte upon which Mt. Heaven sat, and so the true royal stables sprawled at its southern foot. There were so many horses who needed so many people to take care of them, that it was almost a village unto itself. The main building wasn’t as grand in style as the one on the butte, but was much, much larger, and was mainly in the shape of a giant horseshoe so that there was a courtyard of sorts in the middle. It had a solid stone foundation but was mostly made up of wood hauled up from the Greenwood Forest in the south, or the Micharim Mountains to the west. The wood was a rich medium brown that lent a warmth to the stable, which rose up two stories to a flat roof, crossed with beams made from the trunks of trees that must have been great indeed. The second floor was mostly haylofts and sleeping quarters for the stable boys and girls—little more than straw mattresses laid over the wood, and small self-built shelves for their few possessions. The first floor was mostly made up of stalls large enough to allow the horses free movement, but the wide aisles also branched off into areas for grooming, bathing, and tacking up. One corner was where Bobby lived, as the Royal Stablemaster, but those were the only living quarters attached to the main building.

The other buildings making up the stables were many and varied. There were barns to keep the ploughs, carriages, and other large equipment that might be attached to a horse. There was the smithy, where farriers and armorers worked to keep the horses safe in both work and battle. Pages and some squires slept in the barracks for just that purpose, working their way from the bottom up to knighthood. Next to that were the training grounds, where pages all the way up to Reapers would train with their horses, often under the watchful eye of Horsemaster Gadreel. Grooms and hands with their own families lived in cottages dotting the area between the stables and Mt. Heaven, as well as the farmers who tilled the nearby fields, mostly feed for the horses: oats and grasses to make hay for the winter. The kitchens were there to feed everyone else.

The locals liked to call it Horsetown.

The morning’s cool, which had caused Sam and Dean to wake early from their straw beds, had seen
them through the morning's chores of feeding the horses and mucking the stalls. Now the early autumn crisp of the wee hours had softened into a warm late summer's day, not too different from the day ten years ago that had them trotting up to a little town that happened to be where the Harvelles made their home.

Though the Winchesters now made their home in the royal stables outside Mt. Heaven, the friendship between Bobby and Ellen, and indeed now Sam, Dean, and Jo, had grown into a small enterprise between the stables community and The Roadhouse. Once a month a Harvelle - in recent years, almost always Jo - would hitch up their wagon and make the journey to Horsetown bringing barrels of beer and cider. In return, the stable folk would pay with spices and ingredients more readily available in the metropolis of the city, and oats and hay to keep The Roadhouse's small but growing enterprise fed. As there was no better brewmaster in the whole of Michaeretz, the stablemaster deemed it an excellent deal, and horsemaster and knights all turned a blind, knowing eye to it—and, perhaps, enjoyed some of the beer themselves.

Per the letter Ellen had sent Bobby earlier in the week negotiating that month's trade, Jo should be arriving not long before midday. The journey, usually a day's ride, took a little longer with a laden wagon, causing her to camp for part of the night along the way. It was perfect for Sam and Dean, because while there was always work to be done, they didn't really need to be anywhere until lunchtime, when the horses not out to pasture needed to be taken care of and the mess was open for the midday meal.

The breeze was gentle, rolling in across the prairie, grass stalks bending to its caress. It wicked the sweat off Dean's brow in no time as he rode out on Impala's back toward the eastern road. Sam loped along next to her, at 20 years old actually surpassing Impala at the withers by a few inches (and sadly, therefore, taller than Dean by a few inches as well). The square meals Bobby had promised and the many years of daily labor had given them both broad shoulders and muscles enough to get the job done, though all that horse grooming didn't leave much time for personal grooming, Dean lamented, eyeing Sam's long hair, which was pulled back by a leather cord.

On the eastern edge of the little village that had grown up around the stables sat Bane Cottage; whether the name came from the family that lived there or the family had taken on its name was now unclear. Lady Tasha lived there, Chief Assistant to the Royal Mages, and her twin children Max and Alicia (their father had been among the casualties of the Border War). Though not a Reaper herself, Lady Tasha acted as the liaison between the Reapers and the King, now one of the only mages left in the court, and by far the most powerful. She would take the spells given to her by the king, and prepare them for the Reapers to use, powders and potions and pouches: a bane to all the enemies of the kingdom. The cottage itself was slightly warped, one of the few left in the area made with sod as well as wood and stone, and a roof humbly thatched. Arcane magical symbols adorned the doors, and on the inside dried herbs hung among the empty vials of the trade. Often while working in the pastures one could see a pinkish-purple smoke puffing from the little chimney, but this morning not even a wisp curled skyward.

Sam broke off from Dean and Impala anyway as they passed it, and without any prompting Impala
slowed her walk. The Banes and Bobby were the only people rich enough in Horsetown to have a personal book collection, and Sam shamelessly borrowed them whenever he could, though by now he’d probably read them all a hundred times apiece. Dean had read most of them a few time himself.

Dean sighed and stretched himself along Impala’s back, staring at the sky and legs dangling off her sides. The only clouds in sight were those high ones, thin and wispy as feathers, heralding the coming cold. Distantly, he heard Sam knock on the cottage door.

After about a minute Dean heard Sam’s footsteps in the grass, catching up to Impala. "No one’s home,” he said. "Must have made a castle run." Every now and then Lady Tasha would make a trip up to the top of Mt. Heaven to meet with King Metatron and gather spells.

Dean hummed in response, closing his eyes. He liked Horsetown, and Bobby, and Rufus who looked after the tack and Benny over in the smithy and mostly, to be honest, all the horses themselves. But every now and then, even though they were so often too hot or too cold, so tired and hungry, Dean grew nostalgic for their years wandering the plains, the three of them. It was hard but never lonely, not with his brother and his horse at his side. They’d been beholden to no one but each other, and sometimes, when the wind was right, and Impala was restless, Dean considered picking up and leaving where they left off.

But Sam was happy here, and sometimes Dean was too, and it wasn't a bad life. Didn't mean Dean wasn't going to enjoy the peace that settled between them, just them and the grass and the sky.

After a while Impala found a patch of grass that suited her, and started eating. She was a big horse and could munch all day. At the halt Sam dropped and laid on the ground, hands behind his head, skygazing. Dean sat back up and scanned the eastern horizon. While there was a single rider on their way in, and a small group of travelers on foot heading out, the road was quiet. All of Horsetown was quiet today, in fact, and the bustle of the city was distant enough to be a hum no more niggling than a fly's. No knights had yet sent down to have their horses prepared for a day’s work, and Bobby ran the stables so well that there was nothing beyond the usual upkeep. It was good, Dean thought idly as he braced his hands on Impala’s back, and slowly pulled himself to a handstand. Maybe they’d have time to share with Jo what they’d learned since last they saw her. You could learn a lot from watching squires and knights train.

He turned on his hands and walked on them toward Impala’s rump, then turned and walked back. Sam and Dean could never become knights, not without a noble sponsor, and they always picked from families of their own rank. Even the little seven-year-old pages were technically of higher rank, though they’d been working in the stables since before they were born. Most knights didn’t give them more than a look, as long as their horses were being taken care of. At least that meant the brothers had a reason to watch the knights at work. Most grooms and other workers in Horsetown accepted and even enjoyed their lot in life, but Dean had never quite been able to shake the awe he’d felt the first time he’d seen them in full armor, the knights gleaming in silver trimmed with gold, the
The brothers, at least, had one advantage over most other grooms: they had their own weapons. Their mother’s bow was strong and sturdy as ever, and their father’s sword of such high quality that Benny gave them the side-eye for weeks after he first saw it, convinced there’s no way they hadn’t stolen it. Both weapons were too big and heavy for the boys they were, but determination and hard work had them swinging and pulling in no time. So no, they couldn’t train with the knights, but they could watch, and they could train with each other—and Jo, when she was around. In fact she was privy to her own school of kitchen work and rowdy drunks, and there was no one better at the knife, whether throwing it or in close quarter combat, entirely untroubled by the code of chivalry endemic to the ranks of knighthood.

That same code, so concerned with appearance as well as strength, also prevented the best riders from learning the tricks Sam and Dean had picked up, even from before. Impala had always been patient with them, and even now it didn’t disturb her grazing one bit to have Dean flip from his hands onto his feet, pirouetting on one set of toes and then arching backward back onto his hands. During festivals, when Michaeretzers far and wide descended upon Horsetown, the Winchesters and a few other denizens of the stables would take over a paddock of their own, and do trick riding for extra coin. The fact that Impala was so big and intimidating made people that much more impressed by what Sam and Dean could do, though they both knew it was just as much up to the mare, and she hadn’t once dropped them yet.

“I dreamed again last night,” said Sam, apropos of nothing.

Sam leaned up onto an elbow in the tall grass so they could see each other better. “No. That’s just the thing.” He twiddled with a grass stalk. The breeze slipped a lock of his hair from his ponytail, and drew it across his eyes, though now they stared into nothing. “It was somewhere I’d never been before. I could actually see much. There were two, maybe three people, and they were shouting, and magic was flashing everywhere, this…malicious magic. I almost recognized it but I swear it wasn’t from another dream.” He tucked his hair back behind his ear. “Someone was crying, and afraid. I think it was a child. I couldn’t help him, I couldn’t…”

Dean struggled to keep his expression open, forced himself to listen though he didn’t want to hear another word, didn’t want to think about his brother being forced by foreign magic to see and feel these wretched, evil things.
“Then the child screamed,” Sam whispered. “And it turned into this hideous, animal sound...like a horse squealing in pain...” He shook his head, as if ridding himself of his own memory. “Just a dream, right?” he said, with a small, sad little smile.

“Sure, Sammy,” Dean agreed.

Just then Impala lifted her head and looked toward the road. Honed by years of necessity, Sam and Dean immediately turned their heads in the same direction; a horse’s senses were strong and quick and best to be trusted, especially Impala’s. From his vantage point on her back, Dean spotted what had caught the mare’s attention first: a large wagon practically overladen with barrels and kegs. “Jo!” he said. Then to Sam, “You mind?”

“Go ahead,” he answered.

Dean hopped back onto his feet, and spaced them out on Impala’s back. “Come on, Baby. Wanna run?”

Impala nickered and broke into a trot, and then into an easy canter. Dean bent his knees and stretched his arms, moving with the flow of the horse, a rhythm as familiar to him as his own heartbeat. He shouted in joy at the wind in his face, the trust of his mare, and the anticipation of seeing his friend. Impala’s long legs ate up the distance in no time, and Jo lifted her hand to wave at him, reins loosely held in the other. Impala slowed of her own accord and trotted up to Beryl, a dapple grey stallion Impala had foaled five years ago. His sire was a draft horse which made him large and exceptionally strong, perfect for the loads of barrels the Harvelles needed him to pull, and his name was Beryl nominally because of the pale green of his eyes, but mostly because Jo had a shit sense of humor. The horses greeted each other and Impala maneuvered herself so that she was walking next to her son. Dean put his hands on his hips and grinned down at Jo, who gave him an unimpressed look from under her floppy brown hat.

“Show off,” she muttered, but when Dean winked she snorted and smiled back. “Sit your ass down and tell me all the news.”

The raised bench seat of the wagon, tall enough for her to easily see the horizon over Beryl’s bulk, put them at an equal height once Dean set himself normally onto Impala’s back. He happily replied with her request, telling her of the increased comings and goings for the upcoming festival, and the latest snit between Bobby and Rufus (all bark and no bite, per usual). They were just agreeing that a pint or two of Ellen’s house brew would have them laughing and slapping each other’s backs in no time when they came upon Sam ambling toward them down the road, hands in his pockets and free of the darkness that had clung to him only a few moments before. “Sam!” Jo called, waving, and
Sam waved back.

As they got close Sam stepped to the side of the road, then nimbly hauled himself next to Jo on the bench when she scooted over to make room. Beryl continued placidly along.

“Check this out,” said Jo, reaching into her boot and unsheathing a knife to show Sam. It was one piece, and entirely white.

“Bone?” Sam asked, plucking it from her hand to examine it more closely.

“Yep,” she said. “Carved it myself. Rufus was telling me the best way to do it, last time I was here.”

“Nope.”

Given how thick and long the knife was, it must have been a big animal. “Uh,” Dean began. “That’s not from a horse, is it?”

Jo rolled her eyes. “No, I made a trade for half a deer carcass that some hunter was dragging up from the south.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Not that I’d be opposed,” she added.

“Shut your mouth,” said Dean. “Next you’ll say you’d eat horses, too.”

“Sure, if I was hungry.”

Dean gasped and lunged forward to cup his hands around Impala’s ears. “Don’t listen to her, Baby, she doesn’t mean it!” Impala snorted and flicked her ears to tell him to shove off. Dean let them go easily and instead wrapped his arms around her neck in a hug, hiding his smile at the laughter he’d succeeded in getting from the other two. He indulged a moment longer before putting on a disdainful air and sitting back up.
“Horse meat used to be a staple of the ancient Michaeretzer diet,” said Sam, having recovered from his laughter.

“Gross, Sam.”

“But it’s true! Bobby has a history book that talks all about how after the Final War only very few large animal species survived in any great number on Chamara…”

Dean let Sam go on about mass graves and horse leather while Jo made appreciative noises about other tools they used to make of horse gut and bone when their country was still new. He didn’t bring up that some of those ancient customs weren’t completely dead, that their mother Mary used to lament sometimes about craving horse meat like she’d eaten in her youth, her large extended family part of a nomadic group that roamed the country and lived on mustang. “But the first time I brought it home for you after a hunting trip you cried and cried,” she used to tell Dean whenever it came up.

“Promise you won’t kill a horse ever again,” he’d beg every time, one of the greatest horrors he could imagine as a child, before he knew true horror. “They’re Impala’s friends!”

“I won’t,” she’d promise, always. Then she’d launch into other stories of her early life, before she met John in a tiny village where her family would stop to trade, and decided she loved him. Dean had never met her family, and never wished to; he could never quite shake that fascinated disgust of them he’d developed as a child, trying to picture the sort of people who would kill horses and rip them apart for their own use. It’s not that Dean had no respect for other animals, but horses were different. They weren’t just companions, they were practically people themselves.

The irony of it all was that these stories are what saved Sam and Dean’s life in the two years they wandered the prairie. While they never resorted to killing or eating horses—Dean would die first—their mother’s tales of living off the land, even in the harsh of winter, were exactly the tools they’d needed to survive. Any time he’d been at a loss, Dean would remember something that Mary had said about her father, or one of her cousins, and he would do what he had to. It seemed, though, that Sam had forgotten the origin of that knowledge.

Of course, that wasn’t the only reason they’d survived. Dean patted Impala’s neck. “Good girl, Baby,” he murmured under the others’ talk.

She tilted an ear in his direction, and turned her head just enough that one of her large, round eyes could settle on his face. She nickered a soft little nicker, the one he’d only ever heard her give to him.
“Yeah,” said Dean. “You too.”

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Upon reaching Horsetown a small crowd had already gathered to greet Jo, and the drink she’d brought. Most were servants from the kitchens sent to fetch the barrels of ale and cider inside; others were milling about between chores in hopes of snagging a bottle or two of something stronger, for the right price. The courtyard was empty besides a few stable girls and boys sweeping away the manure, but the chimneys of the kitchens and the smithy were puffing, and the clang of metal on metal could dimly be heard.

Bobby and Rufus stood at the front of the pack with arms crossed and twin grumpy expressions. Sam, Dean, and Jo tried to hide their smiles at the sight. “Whoa,” Jo said, pulling gently on the reins. Beryl came to a halt, and the wagon with him. She grabbed a bag stored directly behind her, and jumped from her seat. “Bobby,” she greeted. “Rufus.”

Rufus grunted, but Bobby gave her a nod. “Jo. How’s your ma?”

“Great,” she answered. “She and the others will be along in a few days, once the last stragglers for the festival are on their way here.” Being the perfect place to rest before a final day’s ride to the capital, and purveying good food and drink, the Roadhouse Tavern had grown enough for the Harvelle women to take on a couple employees.

“I hope she didn’t wait to send along her whiskey,” said Rufus.

“How could she forget?” Jo uncinched her bag and pulled out a large corked bottle of blue glass.

“Now that’s more like it.” Rufus plucked the bottle from her hands, the irritated lines of his body relaxing into satisfaction.

“And for you,” said Jo, pulling out a letter and handing it to Bobby. To Dean’s surprise, the older man blushed a little.

Dean raised his eyebrows and looked to Sam, who frowned and shrugged. They looked to Jo, whose
wink to them was hidden from Bobby by the floppy brim of her hat.

“Wait,” said Dean. “Bobby, you and El—?”

“Alright, everybody stop standing around and help get these barrels to the kitchens,” said Bobby loudly, cutting him off. “Sooner we do that the sooner this horse gets some rest,” he added, patting Beryl’s nose. The men and women milling about hopped to, and Sam slipped from the wagon to help. Dean sat for another moment, wondering at how the gruff stablemaster and the gruff innkeeper had finally, maybe figured each other out. Several years in the making, this was, and Dean wanted to savor it before dismounting and helping out. He grinned down at Bobby until the man noticed and glared back. “You too, idjit,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Dean smirked, but he barely lifted his leg before Impala suddenly pivoted and trotted away from the courtyard, south. Only instinct kept him from losing his seat, his body responding before thought could catch up. He looked back over his shoulder and shrugged at Bobby—you can’t really pick a fair fight with a horse and win—who narrowed his eyes thoughtfully before turning his attention to Beryl, who was fidgeting restlessly in his harness. As soon as Dean saw Jo rush to the normally placid stallion’s side, he looked forward and tried to figure out where Impala was heading.

South of the main stables were where the paddocks and fenced pastures spread along the edge of the wild. As they passed them, Dean noted the behavior of the other horses, most of them with eyes and ears trained in that direction. Some stood stock still, assessing, but others found retreat to be the better part of valor, and headed to the northern parts of their enclosures. The animals not fenced in, even further south of the paddocks, dozens of bands of horses that spent their nights in the royal stables, cantered to the left and right, creating a clear corridor from the country to Horsetown. Impala stopped in the middle of it, snorting and pawing the ground.

Dean knew her well, and knew while it was not time to panic, she absolutely did not like something that was on its way here. He breathed in and out, forcing his own nervousness away to let calm flow through his limbs, signaling to Impala that he was aware and in control. She stomped once more but then mostly stilled. Her ears flicked this way and that, taking in their surroundings, before finally seeming to zero in on something. Dean kept his eyes trained in that direction, scanning the horizon, but then in the quiet he heard it: a horse’s whinny. Dean held his breath, waiting, not daring to make a sound. Then another whinny came, closer, desperate. Impala snorted again and tossed her head. Another moment and a party breached the horizon, four men on horseback and a fifth roped between them. The horses being ridden were bays and chestnuts but the riderless one in the middle was a pitch black, shinier than shoe polish in the bright sun. It was this horse that threw its head back and whinnied, pulling against its restraints, even as it ran. The other horses looked little happier; the riders’ arms were rapidly rising and falling, in the distinctive motion that meant they were being more than generous with the crop.

Dean grit his teeth and sneered. “Come on, Baby,” he said, giving Impala the slightest nudge with a
barefoot. “Let’s warn Bobby.” She gave a mean-sounding rumble but took the suggestion, turning and almost immediately falling into her own gallop. Dean leaned low over her neck and let her have the speed; she slowed of her own accord when they reached the courtyard, pulling back to a canter and circling the perimeter, sending chickens squawking into the corners. Beryl was nowhere to be seen—had probably been taken inside by Jo—and the wagon was half unloaded. “Bobby!” Dean called.

Servants and grooms stopped their work; pages and stable kids giggled in the colonnade and waited for the gossip. Bobby himself came striding back to the courtyard from the direction of the kitchens. “What’s the business, boy?”

Impala stopped her canter at Dean’s subtle request, but she pranced restlessly around the stablemaster. “Wranglers,” said Dean derisively.

Bobby easily picked up that he did not mean the honest kind. “What do you think they want?”

“Black horse bounty.”

Bobby raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. It had been so long since King Metatron had put out the call for black stallions that very few people bothered to call for it anymore. But as it had never been officially rescinded, those 10,000 crowns were still up for grabs. Bobby sighed and shook his head. “One of you send for Horsemaster Gadreel!” he hollered in the general direction of the kids. Half of them jumped into action, racing each other to the pigeon coops where they could send a quick summons to the royal stables on the butte. The Royal Horsemaster was the only one, besides the king of course, who could make a decision on the bounty. Not that the king had ever bothered showing up before.

The word spread quickly around Horsetown that a black horse was on its way, so that despite the coming party’s pace people were pouring into the courtyard before their hooves were even heard. Sam appeared at Impala’s side and rested a hand on her neck. She spared a moment to give him a greeting nicker and a gentle nudge back with her nose, but then she was back to business.

When the black horse’s whinnies reached the human ears of the courtyard, most of the muttering fell off. The pounding of hooves sounded loud on the packed dirt of Horsetown proper, and soon all could see the four men with their equine prize. Just as Dean had suspected, they were liberal with their crops both on their own horses, and on the black one when they thought it was out of line. It was made doubly worse by the simple fact that there was no real urgency to their arrival, no reason to spur their mounts into speed excepting, of course, the fact that these assholes wanted to make an entrance.
The five horses thundered into the courtyard of the stables, and the riders pulled hard on their bridles. The black horse lunged while they were distracted, and if the ropes hadn’t been attached to the other horses, who balked and whinnied at being pulled in different directions, it may have succeeded. The foremost rider took his crop and gave the horse a sharp snap on the chest to force it back. “Stop that,” the man snarled. His hand twitched toward the large whip coiled to his saddle, Dean would bet the only reason he hadn’t used it yet was because he thought it might fetch him a lower price if the horse looked too beat. And judging by the folk bristling about him, he also bet that he wasn’t the only one who was drawing conclusions about these men.

When all five horses had settled down, chests heaving like bellows from the exertion, the lead rider finally looked at his audience. “My name is Salinger,” he said. He sounded like he was from eastern Michaeretz, close to the marshes. “And I am here to see the king. Go summon him.”

Bobby and Rufus—now standing in a united front at the center of the crescent that curved around the visitors—both snorted. “No one summons the king,” said Bobby. “He summons you. I’m the Royal Stablemaster. What’s your business?”

Salinger opened his mouth, no doubt to argue, but must have thought better of it. He settled for looking down his nose at Bobby, not deigning to dismount from his horse. “Well then inform the king, Stablemaster, that I have here a black stallion worth 10,000 crowns.”

“We’ll be the judge of that,” muttered Rufus.

“Let’s see him, then,” said Bobby.

The four men obliged as best they could, nudging their horses to the side and pulling the ropes taut in four directions, leaving the stallion more open to inspection. The ropes chafed at the horse’s neck, and his coat was shiny with sweat, muscles trembling with exhaustion, but it was nevertheless plain to see that this was no run of the mill animal. He stood at two to three hands taller than the horses around him, for starters. Dean would even estimate about 17 hands: a few inches shorter than Impala, but still bigger than most of the horses in the stables. His mane and tail were long and unkempt, the generous feathers above his hooves matted and filthy, but the horse’s bearing was proud, angry, and clearly very strong. Both Bobby and Rufus walked closer to the horse (not too close). The stallion tossed his head and whinnied, warning them away. His forelock flopped from his forehead to reveal the only marking on his coat: a white star on his forehead, remarkable due to what look like its perfect, circular shape.

“You were riding pretty hard and the horse isn’t shod,” said Bobby, still looking critically at the animal. “Have you been checking hooves?”
Salinger made a face. “You think I’m getting anywhere near that thing’s legs?”

“Word of advice, son,” Bobby said, his mild voice belying the scathing energy most of Horsetown was seething with at Salinger’s attitude. “Don’t get in the horse wrangling business if you don’t know how to wrangle horses.”

“Bring me to the king,” the man retorted, “and when I get my reward I won’t need to.”

“Right,” said Bobby, showing enviable patience. “This horse got a pedigree?”

“No. It’s a mustang.”

Dean couldn’t hold back his incredulous laughter at that. Mustangs were strong and hardy, but were definitely a lot smaller than this stallion. Sam braced his shoulders and crossed his arms; many others weren’t being too subtle about what they thought of this, either, the word ‘liar’ prevalent in the muttering, and Rufus’s not so quiet, “Boy, you must think we’re some kind of stupid.”

“We caught this horse fair and square!” Salinger shouted, standing up in his stirrups.

And the stallion took his chance.

He lunged to his left, pulling Salinger’s horse, who bucked and tossed his rider from the saddle. The black stallion reared, roaring. The other wranglers shouted, all of them trying to force their own horses closer to administer the crop. Salinger leapt up, unhurt (too bad), and snatched his whip from off his horse, flicking to uncoil it. Sam leaped forward and grabbed his arm. “Don’t,” he said. Salinger curled his other hand into a fist, but then Dean and Impala were there, and one look up into the mare’s flaring nostrils had him startling into letting go of the whip. Sam tossed it aside.

The most experienced squires and grooms were trying to help calm all the horses down, but for the stallion it was easier said than done. The desperation with which he tried to break free, the terror in the rolling whites of his eyes, made Dean’s heart ache. His squeals and whinnies were so loud they hurt the ears, and horses currently in their stalls were starting to answer. If they didn’t contain this now, every horse within a mile was going to spook.

Cautiously he touched his heels to Impala’s flanks to see if she’d be willing to get closer. To his surprise, she immediately responded, walking past those tugging on the ropes and arched her neck to
her full height, in a clear challenge to the stallion. His response was almost comical; when he arched his neck in response and half rose off his forelegs in his own challenge, he seemed to come to himself and drop back down, stymied by the unmoving, solid wall of Impala. This close and still the black stallion’s eyes proved to be a bright blue. That was also highly unusual; black horses almost always had dark eyes, and even lighter horses usually had a pale blue, nothing so rich. Dean wondered if Salinger and his cronies might get their crowns after all.

“Get that beast away from my property!” growled Salinger.

Dean didn’t dare turn to look—if Impala or the stallion decided to attack he needed all the warning he could get—but thankfully Sam was still on the guy. “Back off,” his brother said.

“That will be enough of that,” came a new voice, loud and commanding. That steady, even voice was instantly recognizable to all those in Horsetown: the Royal Horsemaster, arrived just in time.

When Dean subtly suggested to Impala that she move backward, she didn’t move. Dean bit his lip and was about to suggest it again when at last Impala snorted, and walked back a few steps. The stallion snorted, but did not pursue.

Gadreel and his entourage were all mounted, sitting proudly in their saddles and wearing the yellow and white livery of Metatron. Their horses were well groomed and also well in hand, a sharp contrast to the four would-be wranglers, and the nervous horses under their charge. The horsemaster took in the relative quiet after the chaos, and cleanly dismounted his horse. Just like his words, every move he made was steady and considered, and along with his imposing height (barely shorter than Sammy) he cut an imposing figure as he walked across the courtyard. Only Bobby and Rufus did not make way for him, meeting him at minimum safe distance from the stallion. He nodded to them in greeting, glanced at Dean up on Impala’s back, then dropped his eyes to Sam and Salinger. “Are you the man who seeks the bounty?”

Salinger violently shrugged off Sam’s hands and marched up to Gadreel, tugging his horses behind him by the reins. “I demand to speak to the king!”

The horsemaster raised an eyebrow, mouth tightening as his eyes flicked to where the bit wasn’t sitting well in his steed’s mouth. “I am Royal Horsemaster Gadreel,” he said. “In all equine matters I speak for the king.”

“I have here a black stallion, strong and healthy. It was caught by me.” He glared around at the onlookers, daring them to challenge. When no one spoke, he relaxed a little and turned a smarmy smile onto Gadreel. “The bounty is 10,000 crowns.”
“The bounty is up to 10,000 pounds, at the discretion of the royal house,” responded Gadreel. “And I assure you that no one has yet received the full amount.”

Salinger’s face danced between shock and anger. “But look at him! Have you ever seen a finer horse?!!”

“What I see is a weary horse poorly used.” Then, ignoring the other man’s sputtering and the mutinous glares of the other wranglers, Gadreel ducked under the first rope so that he could circle the stallion. The black horse stamped and kept careful watch while the horsemaster made his circuit, but the man knew his work and remained calm, steady, no sudden movements. The wary horse did not attack.

His circuit finished. All of Horsetown waited, silent, for the verdict. Not even the smithy clanged with noise. The stallion himself still was trained toward him, and nickered: not a friendly sound, but not entirely unfriendly either. At length Gadreel turned to the expectant Salinger. “For this horse you may have one thousand crowns.”

“One thousand crowns?” one of the men cried.

Salinger, for a change of pace, tried obsequiousness. “But surely—surely if not 10,000, then 8,000 would not be—”

“One thousand,” the horsemaster repeated calmly.

“Five thousand,” Salinger returned. “We are owed at least five thousand.”

“This is not a marketplace, Mr. Wrangler, if wrangler you be,” said Gadreel, voice taking on an edge. “You may have one thousand crowns and be pleased you have made glad your sovereign. As an additional kindness you may have free lodging here for the night, and have your horses looked after by the royal grooms and farriers.”

Salinger glanced over at his compatriots, whose sullen looks were eloquent enough. “One thousand crowns,” he agreed, stiffly.
Gadreel bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment. “Very good. Give each of these men 250 crowns.”

Two of his assistants dismounted and one unbuckled a chest from her horse’s saddle. It was a dark wood trimmed in gold. She pulled a key from around her neck and opened it. The denizens of Horsetown looked on in shock as the two women together approached each man in turn, the one not carrying the chest handing five small bags of over 50 crowns apiece. None of them had ever seen so much gold in one place, not even those that frequented the castle on business. They jingled faintly as the men secured them in their saddlebags.

At a nod from Bobby, Sam and a few other grooms went to the ropes and unwound them from the wranglers’ saddles.

“When you are ready we can lead your horses to trough,” said Gadreel, when this business was done.

Salinger huffed and mounted his horse. “We can look after our own property,” he sneered, cruelly digging his spurs into his steed’s flanks. His buddies followed suit, and soon they were gone. And good riddance.

“Gods, with that kind of gold they can look after their horses for the rest of their lives,” said Bobby. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“The horse ain’t worth more than a hundred crowns, max,” Rufus agreed.

“If they had come in good faith,” Gadreel answered, “I might have given them even more.”

Why?! Dean wanted to shout, but bit his tongue.

Thankfully, Bobby could get away with what Dean could not. “Well why don’t you enlighten us, then.”

“Because I believe that this is the horse that Metatron has been seeking.”
Suddenly the stallion seemed to realize that only men were holding him back now. He reared and bucked and pulled, gnashing his teeth at anyone who ventured too close. Dean urged Impala to intervene in hopes it would work a second time, but Gadreel was faster. He stepped up to the panicking horse, drew a powder from his pocket, and blew. The horse sneezed once, twice, and then he stood still. Unnaturally still.

This was a magical technique that the trainers would sometimes use on horses who wouldn’t cooperate, just to make them docile for a while. Dean hated it. If you couldn’t reach an understanding with a horse, maybe that horse just wasn’t made to work with people. It was cheating. It was servitude. It was wrong. Besides, it always unsettlingly reminded him of the blank look Sam had got after the Berserker Demon used that yellow powder on him, all those years ago. And Dean had never seen Gadreel use it himself.

“Stablemaster, if you would be so good as to have your best people groom this horse, quickly as they can,” said Gadreel, striding back to his own horse.

“Yeah? And where are you going?” he responded snippily. Bobby had no more love for spellwork being used on horses than Dean did.

Gadreel mounted gracefully. “To summon the king,” he answered, expertly turning his horse back toward the butte. “He will not want to wait.”
Bobby didn’t speak until Gadreel and his entourage were out of earshot. “Shit,” he muttered, looking at the dazed horse. Then he turned to the crowd at large. “King protocol,” he announced.

No one needed telling twice. It wasn’t usual for the king to visit the stables at the foot of the butte, but it happened on occasion, though not nearly as frequently as when the black horses were still streaming in. Still, everyone knew their duty and rushed off to their portion of the stables, tidying all they could. It was a blessing that the festival was in a few days, so that most areas weren’t too dirty. Regardless the kids were out at the north facade of the stables scrubbing the cobblestone where the king would alight from his carriage, any last stalls that had not been mucked were hastily attacked by the hands, grooms went after any horse still in the vicinity with a brush, and the kitchen paused its preparations for luncheon to put together some light refreshments for the king and any who would accompany him.

“Not you boys,” Bobby told Sam and Dean. “You’re on stallion duty with me. Rufus?”

The man in question grunted, already undoing the ropes around the horse’s neck as if they’d personally affronted him. Sam jumped to help his as the others holding the ropes handed them off into his care. Dean slipped from Impala’s back and gave her a small pat on the rump, letting her know she could wander off for the time being.

“The king will probably want to see him in a pretty halter.”

The older men shared a look, though Dean couldn’t guess the meaning. Metatron had been king of Michaeretz for half of his life, now, and for most of Sam’s. Neither of them had ever truly interacted with him, but they were grateful for the peace he’d brokered with Luciterra, ending the Border War, and they had also heard tell of his coming to the people and performing magery to heal citizens of Mt. Heaven during times of widespread illness. Many of the higher-ranking people in Horsetown, however, were longer-lived, having spent so much time around Reaper magic—they’d never be truly young and immortal, like a powerful mage could be—but Rufus and Bobby were about 80, though they looked middle-aged, and Benny, who was surrounded by the spells regularly put into a Reaper’s weapons and armor, was well over 100 years old though he didn’t look a day over 40. Most of them were short of praise when it came to Metatron, though they never badmouthed him directly.

When Sam had once confronted Bobby and Rufus about it as they all sat around the stablemaster’s small dining table, asking whether it was just because they hadn’t gotten used to Metatron yet as their king, they’d shaken their heads. “So Prince Castiel was kidnapped, right?” Rufus had pointed out.
“And Metatron parleys with Lucifer’s camp well enough to stop the fighting. But what were the terms? Was the prince’s return on the table?”

Bobby had downed the whiskey left in his glass. “And what about the other stolen kids?” he’d mumbled.

“Whatever they talked about, the prince stayed missing, the other kids stayed missing, and as far as we can tell, the search stopped pretty quickly. Besides,” Rufus had added, “the man can barely tell the front end of a horse. Which is probably why he collects them instead of rides them.”

They’d all chuckled at that, and the subject was changed.

In the present, Rufus coiled the last of the ropes around under his elbow. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said, heading off toward the tack room.

Bobby gently touched the black stallion’s flank, in the just the spot that encouraged horses to move. Magicked into compliance, he responded easily and with some coaxing was led to the nearest bathing area in the stables. Here the floor was stone and easily mopped, right near a pump where they could fill buckets with water. Between Sam and Dean several buckets were pumped full in short order, and they wasted no time in splashing the horse, whose muscles didn’t so much as twitch. The three men scrubbed him down washing the dirt and sweat away. Though they said nothing, all of them looked darkly at the ring the ropes had chafed around the stallion’s neck, and were most gentle there.

When the horse was clean and brushed, Bobby and Sam started work on his mane and tail, while Dean knelt to inspect the horse’s hooves. He picked up one of the horse’s back legs and examined the hoof’s walls; the horse may not have been a proper mustang, but the thick hoof wall in no need of trimming indicated that he might at least have been feral for a few years. This was a horse used to being on the move, and not idling in a barn or stable. It needed no more than a perfunctory cleaning from his journey, no rocks or irritants embedded in the soft inner flesh, and happily this was true for the other three hooves as well.

In no time at all the black stallion was gleaming in the sunlight pouring through the archways, his round white star seeming to sparkle on his forehead. Now that he was clean it was easy to see his pleasing form and his good strength, and the neat trim his mane and tail had been given made the horse a pretty object indeed. No more than that, with the spell in place; the horse’s spirit was muted, and even Rufus looked uncomfortable as the stallion barely gave a blink of his blue eyes when he slipped a halter over his head. It was a shiny black leather with silver inlays, giving the illusion against his dark coat that it was only a thin, delicate chain adorning the horse instead of sturdy craftsmanship.
Exactly the kind of illusion a collector would prefer.

Bobby pronounced the horse ready and took up the lead clipped to the halter. With another soft touch to the flank, he led the horse to the north entrance of the building. Rufus, Sam, and Dean trailed behind, and at the sound of a second set of hooves clopping against the stone floor, they turned in surprise to see that Impala was following as well. Usually when Dean gave her free rein she went off to graze with the other horses, galloping or frolicking at leisure, but now she was hovering like she only did when she felt Sam and Dean weren’t quite safe. Though they weren’t small children anymore, she’d still treat them like her foals, now and then, and preferred to keep them in her sights.

Sam and Dean shared a dark look at this behavior, but nevertheless continued after Bobby. It was customary when a horse was being presented to its owner, often a knight or noble, for the grooms who’d prepared it to be at hand to answer for their work. Generally the owners felt no need to even acknowledge them, however, and Dean hoped that proved the same for the king.

The middle section of the north end of the stables had a full second floor only. The ground floor was a colonnade of wide arches, allowing easy access from the butte to the inner courtyard of the stables. The road from Mt. Heaven proper was paved in stone, ending in an open piazza with room enough for people and horses to gather. Squires and pages were already squared away and standing in loose rows to one side, each dressed in the livery of the knight who was their sponsor. The last of the cobbles were being scrubbed, and chickens and goats were ushered back to the other side of the building.

Bobby nodded to himself when he saw things were well in hand, and passed the horse’s lead to Dean. “Now I have to do a little grooming of my own,” he said. So while Bobby and Rufus grumpily went back inside to gussy themselves up in a way that befit their stations, Sam and Dean, who only owned the practical clothing of their lowly positions, kept watch of the stallion as the preparations continued. Kitchen staff set up a table in one corner, piling it high with pitchers and plates stacked with cakes, fruits, and cheeses. Impala, Dean noticed, was standing just inside the colonnade, her dark coat allowing her to blend into the shadows, as discreet as a horse of her size could get. Sam was petting the black stallion’s face and neck, murmuring soft assurances into his ear.

“He can’t hear you when he’s under that spell,” Dean said.

Sam turned a hard look onto his brother. “You don’t know that.”

Dean shrugged. Sam could talk to a blank wall all he wanted.
His eyes were wandering back to the food table when a shout reached the stables. Everyone looked toward the road, where a chestnut horse was coming toward them full-tilt. It was the Banes’s mare, Twine, carrying Max and Alicia. Alicia was in front with her hands on the reins, leaning forward with determination, but Max was behind her standing in the stirrups to the full height his twelve years allowed him, waving one of his arms while the other kept balance on his twin’s shoulder. “The king!” he shouted. “The king is coming!”

Even though that’s exactly the eventuality everyone had been preparing for, the piazza burst into an even bigger flurry of movement. Squires and pages made their loose lines tight and even, dirty stable kids scattered, and everyone else was running to and fro putting in that one last touch. Sam and Dean stood in the center of it all, the still horse the eye of a frantic storm.

Twine clattered down the last leg of the road and Max sat back down. “Whoa!” called Alicia, and the mare dropped to a trot before coming to a halt right in front of the Winchesters.

“It’s not just the king,” Max said, loud enough for everyone to hear. “It’s Horsemaster Gadreel and several knights and half the court besides!”

An outcry arose from the corner where the kitchen staff worked, and several scullery kids went dashing back to the kitchens to share the news.

“It’s almost like the festival started early,” added Alicia. “All of Mt. Heaven is following the retinue down, like it’s a big parade.”

Everyone shifted nervously at that. Horsetown was not prepared for that kind of crowd, and wouldn’t be until the equinox dawned.

“Your mom, too?” Dean asked. The twins nodded. “She tell you to where she wanted you?”

Their shoulders slumped as one. “To stay out of it,” Alicia pouted.

Dean suppressed a smile. He knew this act; the twins were sharp and just getting to the age where they thought they knew best. No doubt they would be lurking with Impala in the colonnade or leaning out the second story lofts with all the stable kids, just as soon as they found the opportune moment.
“Go on, then,” he said, jerking his head toward the building. “Take care of your horse.”

“We will!” they said, and rode Twine into the courtyard.

“Reminds me of someone,” said Bobby. Sam and Dean whipped around to see the Royal Stablemaster in his official yellow and white tunic, hat gone and hair slicked back. Rufus came up behind him in similar attire, tugging uncomfortably at his color. Bobby threw a thumb over his shoulder. “Smartass siblings wreaking havoc and planning trouble?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Dean grinned.

“Sure.”

“Did you hear?” Sam asked them. “About the court?”

“Yeah, half the court and half the city, it sounds like,” said Rufus. “All just for him.”

They eyed the black stallion. He was still unmoving. Dean, almost without conscious thought, lifted a hand skritch the horse’s jaw. “What does Metatron want with you, buddy? And what made Gadreel so sure?”

Suddenly the horse’s eyelids blinked open, and Dean found himself reflected in one enormous blue eyeball. The stallion’s chest heaved and a bunch of air punched out of his throat, but only a very slight vocalization came though. This had his eyes growing wider, rolling up so the whites were visible, and his breaths became rapid. But his legs, neck, tail, and head did not move, almost as if they were disconnected from the rest of him.

“Hey, buddy, hey calm down,” soothed Dean, using long, smooth strokes along the horse’s neck. Whether or not the horse had been aware a few moments before, he was certainly aware now, and Sam took back his position on the horse’s other side, assuring him that it was safe and those mean men weren’t coming back.

Dean refrained from pointing out that the mean man who’d put the spell on him definitely was.
The brothers occupied themselves this way, soothing him until his breaths became more even and his eyes rested normally in their sockets. Bobby and Rufus stood at the northern edge of the piazza, practically on the road, deep in conference with each other. The parade, as it were, had curled around the road and reached the southern face of the butte, and was now visible as a dark, moving mass of people toward the city gate. The twins had not been exaggerating: there must have been hundreds of people following the royal carriage. The procession was headed by the king’s personal guard, decked out not only in their livery, but mail and helmets by the glinting in the sunlight. Then came Metatron in his enormous carriage, white and gold, pulled by a team of four cream stallions decked out in golden harness and plumes sprouting from their heads. As they made the final descent straight on toward the gate and to the road, the carriage resembled a giant albino spider crawling down the side of the butte and lumbering its way to the stables.

Nary a peep was heard, even from the pages, as after the carriage came more of the king’s guard, then nobles either resplendent in their finery riding horses, or hidden in (smaller) carriages of their own. But most of the procession was on foot, a long tail of faceless citizens following the king and his court to Horsetown. The very few times the king had visited before, Dean had still been young enough to gawk with the other stable kids: close enough to see the king was short, a little portly, with a curly mop of graying hair that left his golden crown half-hidden. Close enough to see his wide smile of white teeth, hear a hearty laugh, but never close enough to hear what was being said. He mostly ever talked to Gadreel when it came to horses anyway, and only a little to Bobby and Rufus.

Since then the king had only come to Horsetown on the major festivals, sitting in the special box above the stands at the arena, mostly visible for his clothes, shimmering with gold thread, and the jewels he wore on his head and hands, which sparkled as he waved.

So what in the world was he doing?

Though the procession seemed endless, at length the stragglers turned the corner heading south, and the royal carriage was trundling its way along the road proper. Between horses’ hooves, the clatter of wooden wheel, and the excited discussion of the crowd, a wall of noise reached them when there was still an interminable quarter mile for them to go. The stallion’s breathing started shortening again, and the few other horses present shifted under their squires near enough to knighthood to warrant them; the people were nervous, and the horses were picking up on it. This was so beyond all of their ken. They worked for the king, yes, but that was an abstract to most of them. The societal structure of Mt. Heaven had solidified under millennia of Michael’s rule, and if one thing held true it was that there needed to be at least a dozen people between a lowly groom and the monarch himself.

When the mass moving toward them was close enough to resolve into individual people and horses—Gadreel was clearly visible riding to the right of the royal carriage—Bobby took the stallion’s halter from Dean. The Winchesters stepped back a few paces, and Bobby gently coaxed the horse to turn and stand directly in the middle of the large stone square, in profile to the approaching procession.
The king’s guard, on their large and lively destriers, split apart and trotted around either side of the piazza, boxing it in. The carriage clattered directly into the square, and the rear guard formed a half circle around it. A few other carriages were allowed to pull up and form a line behind the king, and several knights trotted in wearing the many colors of their personal liveries. The rest of the crowd spilled around the square, milling in the grass and craning their necks between the guards who prevented them from entering further.

Footmen leapt from the backs of the carriages and opened the doors, handing down nobles in silks and velvets, all the bright and expensive dyes no one in Horsetown could afford. Dean couldn’t help but stare at the necklaces glimmering on their chests, the elaborate hairstyles, and the colorful paint the lords and ladies wore on lips and eyes. He was even stuck with a bit of longing, thinking of all the balls and fetes held in the royal castle and in the grand homes of various estates, and now understood why the poets would sing about it with such lovely, flowery words. It was no wonder, if every surface was as gilded as their carriages and every turn of a dance had rainbows flashing across the room.

Then again, he also felt he now understood Bobby, who always called it a “damn headache” any time he was forced to attend one.

The royal footman, his uniform a perfect match to the royal carriage’s white and gold motif, waited to descend from his station until after everyone else was ready. All but the guards dismounted from their horses when they saw him hop down. When he put his hand on the golden handle of the carriage door, window shaded with a gold curtain, the entire crowd grew silent. The handle clicked; the door span wide; the footman bowed. King Metatron stepped out of the carriage and smiled.

The crowd cheered, and every knight and noble, squire and page bowed or curtsied. Those who made their living in Horsetown and hadn’t been born in the upper classes awkwardly followed suit. Dean felt especially uncomfortable, given that he wasn’t used to answering to anybody (except Bobby, but that didn’t really count). He’d never given more than a polite bow of the head to a knight or even a Reaper. While still bent at the waste, he dared lift his head a little and saw the king still smiling, waving benevolently at the adoring crowd. When Metatron turned his attention back on the open square, Dean hastily ducked his head again.

“Come, come now, we’re all friends here! Stand! No need for this nonsense!” The king laughed, slapping Gadreel on the back, and the nobles obligingly tittered as they rose from their obeisance.

“Sure, five minutes later,” Dean muttered. He was beginning to see why Bobby and Rufus weren’t fond of him.
King Metatron did an exaggerated turn, as if he’d only just caught sight of the black stallion he’d made the journey for. “Is this the horse you were telling me of, Gadreel?”

“Yes, your majesty,” the horsemaster replied. Now that the man was standing at his full height, he practically dwarfed the king, who was almost a foot shorter.

Metatron didn’t seem to be worried about his height in the least, thought, as he walked confidently toward the still horse, purple cloak swishing about him. The stallion’s breathing, however, was getting worse. Though he was facing forward horses could see perfectly well to their sides, and all this pomp and circumstance was clearly bothering him, as well as being immobile. He could also just be spooked by the gold glinting in every direction, Dean allowed.

The king barely spared a glance at Bobby; his focus was completely on the horse. After a moment of staring, he slowly walked around the stallion, hands behind his back, the silver and gold brocade of his doublet shining in the daylight. As he came around the far side of the horse, he passed very close to Sam and Dean without paying them any heed, his sharp light eyes roving sharply over every inch of the stallion’s form. In that look Dean finally saw a hint of the powerful mage he had to be to inherit the crown. A cloud of perfume pulled past their noses in his wake.

Metatron completed his circuit and again stood next to Gadreel, still gazing at the horse. “You were right, Gadreel.”

Gadreel was a stern and stoic man by nature, but instead of lightening at the praise his mouth settled into a grim line. He nodded once, then turned to address the crowd. “This horse you see before you is not just a horse,” he began. They all stood rapt. “What you see here before you, who you see here before you, is—”

“WAIT!” the king shouted, glaring. Gadreel drew back and snapped his mouth shut. Metatron’s face melted back into a smile, and he addressed the crowd himself. “My Royal Horsemaster is so excited about his find, but” - and here he sighed - “I can’t help it. I’d like to tell you the story myself.”

Dean stared. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Gadreel excited in his life, and the look of consternation on his face now was certainly not it.

“This is a story that many of you may not have heard of, though it’s one of the oldest of Michaeretz. I think, though, Robert,” added the king, turning to Bobby, “that you horse people might still tell it?”
Bobby worked his jaw, looking like he’d bit directly into a lemon. “Which story, your majesty?”

“The story,” Metatron said grandly, sweeping his arms wide, including all who could see him, “of the Great Horse.

“Long ago,” he continued without sparing Bobby another glance, “even before the rise in power of Charles and Amara, the greatest mages the world has ever known (and my close kin), humans and horses lived in harmony. Horses saw that man was good, and agreed to serve him. Great deeds were performed on horseback, great feats of agriculture and architecture, of speed and distance. But no bond was greater than that between a warrior and his trusty steed.” There the king paused, looking down with a soft smile, as if overcome by the very thought. “We humans are given but one life on this earth, and though some live longer than others” - he let out a small, self-deprecating laugh, eliciting another round of good-natured giggles from the crowd - “some warriors felt that their service, that their sacrifice was not enough. So great was the valor of these ancient warriors that the gods looked down in awe, and decided to grant us a gift.”

He clasped his hands across his belly, scanning the faces of his listeners, from the wide-eyed pages to the nobles fanning themselves and the commoners beyond them. The king certainly had everyone’s attention; Dean’s especially, as he’d heard about Great Horses before, but not a version like this.

“The gods decreed that if a warrior was worthy, if they proved themselves honorable and sacrificed their lives in a noble fight, and their desire to serve a higher purpose was great enough, their soul would be allowed to return to earth—as a horse.” He turned to the black stallion and patted his flank, then let his hand rest there. “As a horse, they would serve other warriors, their own fighting spirit aiding the causes of new generations, new noble quests. But they’d only be ridden by the worthy, mind,” Metatron said, wagging a finger. “A Great Horse will serve you only if you are great, too.

“So when Gadreel rushed up to the castle to tell me of this fine stallion he’d found, so perfect in form and such a great fighting spirit, he was convinced he’d stumbled across a Great Horse, just for me!” He laughed again, like it was a joke.

Those who had witnessed the arrival of the stallion earlier that day looked at each other uneasily, then looked to Gadreel. He was standing stiffly as ever, face harder than stone, giving no indication of his thoughts.

“Well, Great Horses aren’t actually real, but I work in magic and politics, not horses,” said Metatron, “so what do I know? Could it be, that this is a Great Horse?” He walked to the front of the horse, and took the lead from Bobby’s hands. The king tugged, turning the stallion’s head. “Could it be, that it has a soul? Could it be,” he said, lowering his voice in a manner that nevertheless carried, “that there’s a person, living right - in - here?” With his free hand, he tapped the stallion’s forehead, right in the middle of his star.
A moment of silence.

“Regardless” - the crowd startled - “I have taken this as a sign. Whether this fine animal is a Great Horse or not, I trust in the expertise of my Royal Horsemaster. If he feels that this horse is meant for me, and that I am meant to ride this horse, who am I to argue? I accept this generous gift, Gadreel,” the king said graciously. “Of both your faith in my leadership, and of this beautiful creature.”

Someone in the crowd started clapping, and the applause spread across the square and beyond. After a moment, Gadreel bowed. “Your servant ever, my king.”

Metatron smiled, a hand pressed against his heart. When the clapping ended, the king hooked a hand into the stallion’s halter turned his head this way and that, examining the horse’s face. “On this horse, I shall lead out in the field as well as in my court,” he said. “And so I shall name this horse Commander, in deference to the history my horsemaster is so convinced it has” - an indulgent look - “and because upon his back, I shall command my people.” Another round of applause. The king smiled again, though this one was hidden from the crowd, facing as it was toward the stables and partially screened by the black stallion. But Dean saw it, and there was nothing benevolent about it.

Under the noise, Metatron beckoned Gadreel close, where only they and, incidentally, Bobby, Rufus, Sam, and Dean could hear. “I want this horse broken by the Harvest Festival, understand?”

“But—”

“Do you understand?”

Gadreel bowed his head. “Yes, your majesty.”

“Good. Take it away now,” he said, waving his hand at his new horse in dismissal. “Oh, is that a pumpkin pie?”

Not even the mention of pie distracted Dean from Metatron’s abrupt change of pace. The king wandered over to where the table the kitchen staff had brought was overladen with goods, no doubt taken from what was being prepared for the Harvest Festival. Now that the story was over, the nobles flocked to the table, too, and the crowd either settled in for their own picnics or started wandering back toward the city.
Gadreel had not moved, still staring hard at the black stallion, which Dean just could not think of as Commander. Certainly not in this state, upset and unnaturally docile. “Horsemaster?” Bobby prompted, picking up the dropped lead.

Gadreel tore his eyes from the stallion. “It may be some time before the spell wears off. Take him to a stall so he is not harmed.” He waited only long enough for Bobby to nod before turning on his heel and joining the rest of the court.

Bobby led the way back into the stables, taking a right in the colonnade to start heading to Sam and Dean’s corner, the one with the troublemakers. Stable kids and other young servants of Horsetown scattered at their approach; that was definitely Alicia’s hair trailing around a corner. They soon found themselves alone but for Impala, who paced them by a few lengths as they made their way down the hall.

“What the hell was that?” said Dean.

“Publicity stunt,” Rufus grunted.

“No shit, but why?”

“Politics,” answered Bobby. “Why do people always want to break horses? It makes them feel powerful, and it makes them look powerful, too. I agree with Gadreel that this one’s going to put up a hell of a fight, if that’s what he told the king. He does feel a little special.” They reached an empty stall, which happened to be right next to Impala’s. When Sam and Dean gave him twin questioning looks, he said, “If there’s a single horse in this stables that won’t take his crap, it’s Impala. Isn’t that right, girl?” he called over their shoulders.

She didn’t respond, but did watch avidly as Sam opened the stall door and Bobby led the stallion inside. The stalls were generous in the royal stables, allowing free range of movement, so Bobby circled the horse so he was facing back out into the aisle. Rufus took the cue, stepping up and removing the expensive halter.

“What’s bothering me,” said Sam, leaning his elbows on the open door, “is what he said about leading out on the field, and commanding the people. It sounded so…warlike.”

“Sure did,” agreed Rufus, carefully arranging the halter and matching lead in his hands. “As long as
Lucifer is still alive the war will happen again. He didn’t get what he wanted last time. These mages like him and Metatron, they think in the long term. The very long term. If I’m lucky, I’ll be dead and buried by the time war starts up again.” He laughed, setting the small silver horseshoe earring he wore dancing. None of the present men were fooled; Rufus, too, had lost his family in the Border War. “Now if any of you need me, think twice. I’ve got a date with a bottle that has my name on it.” With that he wandered off down the aisle toward the tack room.

Bobby sighed. “Gods willing,” he said, taking the door from Sam and shutting the stallion in.

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That evening, after the chores were done, and all the horses safely in their stalls, the squires and pages off in their own barracks, many of the younger folk of Horsetown gathered behind the kitchens. The fire pit was lit, flames merrily blazing, and all held a mug of fresh cider or beer from a newly opened Harvelle barrel. After toasting Jo, everyone settled in to chat, many excited for the upcoming festival but mostly, that night, talking of the king.

“Did you see how much gold was on that carriage? I wonder how many crowns it’s worth!”

“He looked right at me and he smiled!”

“He went back for seconds of the pie I made!”

Dean snorted. It had not escaped him that there had been no pie left over after the court was done with it. When they’d gone back to Mt. Heaven, they’d left behind little more than crumbs and a stray dyed feather or two.

Instead he focused on Sam and Jo, holding a knife throwing contest. They were aiming at a wooden beam in the side of the kitchens building, notched from years and years of similar contests. It was mostly in jest, both of them tipsy enough to be off balance, but still Dean was proud to see Sam hold his own before the inevitable defeat. When Jo raised her arms in victory, those who had bet on her cheered, while those who’d bet on Sam groaned and handed over a few small coins.

“Y’all never learn, I swear,” Jo admonished them, laughing. But she slugged Sam in the arm good-naturedly, and the two of them stumbled over to Dean, crashing onto the wooden bench on either side of him. “You’d gone back to Mt. Heaven, they’d left behind little more than crumbs and a stray dyed feather or two.

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“In passing,” said Sam.

“Dad would tell us the story once in a while,” answered Dean, surprising himself. He guessed his tongue had gotten a little loose, too. “Don’t you remember?”

“He did?” The firelight flickered bright enough to show Dean that excited, hopeful look he got any time he started talking about their parents. Sam remembered a fair bit, but as the years passed it was clear that Dean could recall far more. Sam was always eager to hear it, and sometimes…sometimes Dean wanted to talk about it just as badly.

He took a fortifying slug of ale before he slumped back against the bench. Sam and Jo scooted to face him, and waited. “Dad’s version didn’t really go like the king’s,” he said. “None of that servitude bullcrap. Like Bobby always says, take care of the horse—”

“—and it will take care of you,” Sam and Jo finished for him.

Dean nodded. “The way Dad would tell it, well…He used to say this is the story his father used to tell him, whose father told him…He’d say, that if you lived an exceptionally good life, a life of hardship and struggle in which you didn’t lose your faith or your kindness, the gods would reward you. You could go to paradise or, before that, you could live one more life, a life of joy and freedom. They would send you back as a horse, king or queen of the prairie, friend to the wind, where you could run without hindrance and you would never starve with all the grass of the plains around you.”

“What about the warriors?” piped up Kevin.

Dean blinked and was surprised to see that most of the people around the fire had stopped talking, and were listening in. He took another swig of his drink to hide his startlement. Kevin, while in his awkward teenage years, was young enough still to dream of knighthood along with many of the other stable kids, before the reality of their station really sank in. He couldn’t help but give him a rueful smile. “Well, if you as a horse in your wandering across the land came across a kindred spirit, a man or a woman living a life of struggle without giving up on their goodness, you could bond with them, be their, ah—” he wracked his brain for the word his father had used. “Helpmeet,” he finally came up with. “And that’s how you know you’re on the right side of things. If a Great Horse thought you were worth sticking around for.”

Josephine, a stable girl, raised her hand like she was in a classroom. “Do you think Commander is a Great Horse?” she asked. This was met with a cacophony of answers from the other stable kids, and
the apprentices from the smithy and the kitchen, which soon devolved into shoving and yelling as the debate grew heated.

“Now hold up!” said Dean, raising his voice. The talking petered off, and one last elbow was thrown. He looked at all their upturned faces, bright and eager. He didn’t quite have the heart to give them the truth: that there was no such thing as a Great Horse, and if there were, they definitely would not choose the king as his companion. “I don’t know if that stallion is a Great Horse, but I do know one thing. If he is, that is a terrible name.”

A chorus of agreement rose up at that, “It’s not cool enough!” and “That’s a rank, not a name!” and the like. Suggestions were tossed about from Michael and Hannah, the old sovereigns’ names, to weapons like Battle-ax, or spells like Blaster, referring to a particularly wicked Reaper trick that explodes whatever it lands on.

Dean shook his head at most of these. “Horses aren’t tools, remember?” he reminded them.

“What would you name him, Dean?” This from Sam, who was smiling—whether at the story or the children, Dean didn’t know.

But he indulged him. “I think…I think if he is a Great Horse, he’s not just here to fight. He’s here to help. That his legacy would not just be how he battled, but how he healed people after.”

“Like a mage?”

“Like the best mages, like they talk about in the legends of the Final War between Charles and Amara. He would have been an Angel, don’t you think?”

“Angel! Angel! Angel!” chanted the Banes twins, and soon the rest of the children took up the name.

The next morning, when Gadreel arrived in Horsetown at dawn and asked where Commander was kept, the stable kids smiled knowingly, and led him to Angel.
Reapers at the Harvest

Chapter by opal_bullets

The next few days found Horsetown in a flurry of preparation. As one of the few times these stables were open to the public, as opposed to the rich stables on the castle grounds, everything had to be cleaned. Banners were put up in fall colors, the oranges and reds and golds to honor all the crops in the orchards, gardens, and fields. Vendors were coming in and setting up little stands in a makeshift market around the arena with its newly raised stands, selling trinkets and goods and street food to challenge what the stable kitchens were planning to sell.

Each morning began before dawn, every one a little cooler than the day before, until the sun rose and hard work warmed them up. Between feeding and mucking and grooming, Sam and Dean ran around and performed the odd jobs they were getting roped into left and right and, when they had time and Impala was willing, practiced their trick riding in anticipation of extra coin. Most everyone was in a good mood, the excitement of the upcoming festival infectious.

Everyone but Gadreel.

As often as they could, Sam, Dean, and many of the grooms would find reasons to go by the training paddock to watch him work with Angel. His assistants would lasso the stallion in his stable, and drag him out to the paddock, whose fences were high enough that even a horse of his strength couldn’t jump over them. At Gadreel’s command they would loose the ropes, and the horse would immediately back away. The brothers had watched Gadreel train horses many a time since they had arrived in Horsetown, and his methods were not those prevalent in most other places. He didn’t intimidate the horse into obeying him; rather he would walk up to them and continually nudge the horse’s flank, exactly in the manner a mare or stallion would who was the leader of their own band, and wanted the band to move. He convinced them, essentially, that he was the lead horse and he could be trusted. It was a beautiful, fascinating process, and no horse had held out for more than a day, their flighty natures no match for Gadreel’s steadfast patience.

Angel was having none of it.

Usually when a horse was pissy with you, they would turn their rump in your direction, saying “You’re so beneath me you aren’t even a threat,” or if you were ignoring them, they liked to encroach upon your space, taking the bullying on themselves. The first action was easy for Gadreel to handle, making it that much easier to reach the flank; for the other he was firm in pushing a horse’s nose away to make sure they knew he was on to them. But Angel did neither. He kept turning to face Gadreel, tail high and nostrils flaring, for all the world looking more akin to a charging bull. No matter what Gadreel did, he rarely could get close enough to touch his flank, even a gentle tap of a crop. Angel showed no fear, and did not even startle when a rickety stand crashed nearby, or a banner got torn in the breeze, skipping and twisting its way through the town. The horse was so
stubborn that he never forgot that Gadreel was in the paddock with him, at least not that the brothers saw. Each day ended with Gadreel blowing more powder into Angel’s face, and leading the stunned horse back into his stall.

After a couple days of this, Gadreel did not lose his cool. Instead he employed new methods meant to stymie Angel’s options. First he had one of the others trainers ride a horse around the perimeter of the paddock, keeping Angel on a rope lead that wrapped around the pommel of her ride’s saddle. That way, in theory, Gadreel would have a better chance of approaching the stallion from the side or behind, close enough to tap him. But they’d barely traversed one side of the paddock before Angel was pulling so hard on the rope the other, smaller horse crashed into the fence, and the rider went flying.

They tried it again with a large draft horse, a paint with large feathers that cascaded almost the entire length of his legs, but Angel showed a surprising amount of strength against him, and eventually the draft gave up and would not move forward either.

The next day Gadreel ordered that the grooms and hands round up the head horses of all the little bands that had formed among the royal stock, to see what affect their alpha natures would have on Angel, if any. One by one they were led into the paddock, but not only did these horses not challenge Angel, they had no interest in him either. Mare and stallion alike would just mind their own business on the opposite side of the paddock, bored in the packed dirt without grass to graze on, and all the humans and horses on the other side of the fence. Angel himself was perfectly content being ignored and ignoring in turn. For the first time he let some exhaustion show; he was still alert, always tracking Gadreel who for the moment was on the outside of the paddock, but he didn’t move much elsewise. It made Dean worried for him. Horses needed to eat pretty much constantly, and spending all day in the paddock without food and little water was wearing him down. At night, when Angel stood in his stall under the thrall of the spell, Sam and Dean would groom him and fill his trough with sweet hay and hearty oats, and place a couple buckets of cool water. When they woke in the morning it would be all gone, but it was simply not enough for the stallion to stay healthy.

And there was no way that Gadreel didn’t know this.

Having found a moment, Sam and Dean were leaning against the fence watching Angel and Stella, an appaloosa mare. In her boredom she was systematically making her way around the fence, nosing for treats from the watchers—though carefully staying, Dean noticed, on her side of the paddock. The trainers pushed her away. Dean felt bad for her, and Sam did too, so they both greeted her and stroked her nose, and scratched behind her jawbone. She nickered happily.

Gadreel looked down his nose at them from the other side of the fence, and strode around. “Go on,” he said to the mare, tapping her flank and encouraging her to go in Angel’s direction. She skipped away and trotted past Angel, turning her rump to him in dismissal. Gadreel looked at the Winchesters, his mouth in the habitual flat line of the past few days, and a subtle scowl twisting his
face into something hawklike. “You should bring Impala. Commander seemed willing to listen to her when he first arrived here.”

Dean tried not to tense up, keeping one elbow on the fence and looking casually up at the horsemaster. He wasn’t sure if he was completely aware of the deal the brothers had struck up with Bobby, that Impala was only there in the stables by the grace of their continued employment. Everyone who lived in Horsetown day in and out respected the agreement, and were grateful for the fine foals she’d added to their stock, but in this moment Dean didn’t feel an ounce of trust toward Gadreel. Still, he had to approach carefully. “Impala would never let herself be put behind a fence she couldn’t easily clear.”

“She would for you.”

“Heh,” huffed Dean, attempting lightheartedness. “No offense, Horsemaster, but I’ve known her pretty much all my life. She ain’t getting in that paddock no matter what I do. She’s out grazing, anyway,” he added, pointing a thumb over his shoulder to the open pasture beyond all the fenced-in paddocks.

Gadreel turned his stern gaze onto Sam, who shrugged in a ‘what can you do?’ sort of way.

“Do you lead your horse,” he asked the brothers, “or does your horse lead you?”

Gods above, if he suggested that Impala deserved some time in Angel’s position next Dean was going to lose it. He opened his mouth, unsure how to phrase fuck you without getting fired, when a murmur rose beyond them, several people lifting their hands to point. “Reapers!” came the cry.

They all turned and sure enough, two Reapers were riding through the outskirts of Horsetown, possibly heading the training grounds proper. Their long black traveling cloaks, glinting with silver runes when the sun hit them right, were a stark contrast to their pale horses. Their hoods were thrown back, though, so it was easy to see that it was the Ladies Billie and Tessa. Both of them were among the oldest people on the continent, having spent so much time around the magic the gods had blessed the royal line with, always keeping spells on their person as befit their station. Even without the spells gifted to them at special dispensation from the king, they were highest rank of knight. The many decades of training made their bearing regal, imbuing them with a stillness that would put all other predators to shame. Dean got butterflies in his stomach at their approach, something between nervousness and admiration. They were both deadly, and achingly beautiful either because of or despite it; Tessa with her light skin and glossy black hair, and Billie—though rumored to be a century older than her companion—just as lovely with her dark skin and luscious curls, both women looking hale and in the summer of their lives.
Sam and Dean stared unashamedly along with everyone else in the vicinity. Most knights stayed around their estates or in the capital at court, but a few wandered. Knights weren’t just the king’s greatest soldiers in wartime; they were supposed to defend the weak and help all their countrymen as a matter of course. But errant knights were rare, even rarer in the years after the Border War as the ranks had not yet swelled large enough to replace all those who were lost. Most of those who survived and wandered were Reapers, the rarest knight of all. And though over the ten years the Winchesters had spent in Horsetown, they’d seen them stop in now and again for news and orders, it was still exciting to see them so close—and two at once!

Instead of skirting the little dirt paddock, though, they rode right up to Gadreel and the Winchesters. Sam and Dean immediately straightened, standing to their full heights; Gadreel, whose posture was always perfect, simply bowed his head in respect. “Lady Knights.”

“Horsemaster,” Billie replied. She, too, had a measured way of speaking, but with none of the stiffness of Gadreel.

“Will you be honoring us with demonstrations this Harvest Festival, Lady?”

Lady Tessa smiled, and it was full of the promise of comfort and safety, as it so often was. The brothers relaxed at the sight of it. “No, we will observe only. We come at the summons of the king. He convinced us that this would be a festival to remember.”

“His majesty seemed especially proud of a horse he said you found,” said Lady Billie. “That him?” She nodded at Angel who was, unnervingly, looking right back at the Reapers. Or maybe still glaring at Gadreel.

“Yes, Lady Knight,” Gadreel answered. “The king has chosen to call him Commander.”

Everyone waited respectfully as the Reapers gazed on the black stallion. At length they shared a look, but what they had gleaned from him, or whatever judgment they had passed, was unclear.

“He is special,” Billie said at last. “But then again, some horses are.”

“The rumor mill speaks of Great Horses,” added Tessa, her smile turning wry.

Gadreel’s lips thinned even further, if that were possible. “The legend has become popular of late,
“Great Horse or no, I wish the king well of him,” said Billie. “And how fares your horse, Dean?” She tilted her head and suddenly Dean was caught on a hook, surprised to find himself the center of her regard. He could understand her remembering Impala—who could forget the beauty that was his Baby?—but why would she ever remember him?

“She’s—She’s good,” he stuttered. He felt a blush spread across his cheeks.

Her lips turned up slightly, as if she knew exactly the kind of effect she was having on him and found it amusing. “We passed the stablemaster on the way in and he told us if we wanted our horses to get the best treatment after a long journey, to bring them to the Winchesters.”

“Oh!” said Sam. “Of course. Won’t you—that is, may we escort you to the stables, Lady Knights?”

“Thank you, Sam,” said Tessa, and then he was blushing too.

With one last look at Angel, who hadn’t moved an inch during the conversation, Dean led the way back to the stables, the Reapers’ pale horses Scythe and Sickle pacing them at the shoulder. As the worked their way across Horsetown everybody, no matter how fast they were running to get to their next task, paused a moment to watch the Reapers pass. When they finally reached the stables and led the knights to the nearest grooming station, where they could bathe the horses and give them the full treatment, they’d gathered with them a gaggle of stable kids in their wake, spilling out of the woodwork like termites begging to be fed.

The Reapers dismounted as one, and several of the kids sighed in longing as their strong legs easily swung over their horses’ backs, their cloaks rippling up to reveal weapons and spells strapped across most of their bodies. Dean had to bite back a sigh himself. The knights unhooked their saddlebags and swords, seemingly oblivious, and Sam and Dean set about removing the horses’ tack. “Who wants to take all this to Rufus?” Dean asked, as he unbuckled Scythe’s saddle.

“Me! Me!” the kids shouted, jockeying for position while still keeping a respectful distance.

Out of the corner of his eye Dean saw Kevin lurking in the background. He motioned him over and handed him the saddle directly. “Make sure everything gets there in one piece, yeah?” he said in an undertone.
Kevin squared his shoulders and nodded dutifully. The rest of the tack was removed in short order, and in the commotion of Kevin directing the kids on who got to take what, Billie drew Dean aside.

“When did Angel last get fed?” she asked.

“Every night we feed him with—” He spluttered to a stop, realizing what she’d called the stallion.

She gave him that small, amused smile again. “Metatron’s story isn’t the only rumor making the rounds.”

Dean gulped, the five letters Jo had jokingly carved into the black stallion’s stall door burning like a brand in his mind.

“I like it,” she said. “But be careful of getting too involved. When strong horses like that break, they break hard. I don’t think I need to tell you?”

While that was not the practice here, Dean had seen it happen a couple of times, and walking into the city was almost an exercise in picking out the wagon nags and beasts of burden whose spirits were entirely gone. “What makes him special?” he dared ask.

“The same thing that makes a person special, Dean,” she said. “Sometimes you just feel it.”

With that cryptic statement she touched the Lady Tessa on the arm to gain her attention, and the Reapers took their leave.

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The morning of the festival, Sam and Dean found themselves startled from sleep when it was still full dark. They’d already been up too late the night before, helping Ellen and Pam unload another wagon of Harvelle drink and setting up their own stand by the arena, so it took a few seconds for the noise to coalesce into words.

“I would not advise that you keep using this spell on him,” the Lady Tasha was saying. “There are stories in the lore about permanent, long-term effects—”
“What would you have me do then, Lady?” Gadreel, uncharacteristically terse. “I do not have the time to fetch a team of experienced wranglers to drag him into the chute.”

“The chute?” Bobby. “Like in a rodeo?”

Gadreel sighed, also rare for him. “I have failed the task the king set for me in training the horse in time for the festival. When I brought this news to him yesterday, in his leniency he decided that it would be an enjoyable event for the people, to let them try and ride him.”

Sam and Dean shared a glance of raised eyebrows. It was hardly the sort of low-brow event that the king liked to watch at the festivals. It was actually kind of impressive that he knew what a rodeo was. The brothers had seen a few themselves, in their years of wandering the country. Some were good fun, full of animals bred for the events, but others could only be compared to torture.

“I ain’t letting anybody stick sharp points in a horse just to make him angry,” Bobby objected, as if reading Dean’s mind.

“I hardly think he needs the extra prompting,” said the horsemaster.

“I mean it,” said Bobby.

“Your concern has been noted, Stablemaster,” Gadreel replied impatiently. “Besides which the king has commanded it. Shall I disobey him?” When this was met with silence he said, “The new supply of stun powder, Lady Tasha.”

Sam and Dean slithered to the edge of their loft, completely quiet after many years of living there, and peeked over the edge in time to see Gadreel blowing another cloud of powder in Angel’s direction. The stallion let out half a squeal in protest before abruptly falling silent. “Have him brought to the arena,” he said, and left.

Bobby and Tasha said nothing until the horsemaster’s footsteps faded away. “What kind of long-term effects we talkin’?” Bobby asked.

“A loss of free will,” she said. “It’s only been reported of humans under the thrall of evil mages, so
maybe it won’t affect Angel. Or maybe his much bigger body is simply buying him more time. This can’t last, Bobby.”

“Alright. I’ll think of something.”

She nodded, and with a small wave, she left, too.

Bobby sighed. “How much of that did you idjits hear?” he asked without bothering to look up.

“All of it,” said Sam, swinging himself onto the ladder and hopping down. Dean followed him, and noted that Impala’s stall was empty, as it often was since she rarely stayed in it for any length of time. Whether Angel knew how to get out of his stall was unclear, as Gadreel had commanded a chain and lock be put around it so that he couldn’t escape.

Bobby pulled the key out of his pocket. “Well let’s get this bronco ready for the rodeo, then.”

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As the sun rose, so the people in Horsetown multiplied. Children ran; dogs barked. Dancers twirled their bangles jangling, skirts and stashes whipping about them as fiddlers fiddled and drummers drummed. The smell of smoked meat and roasted vegetables wafted from the food stands, and a firebreather, tattoos of dragons snaking about his body, shot flame from his mouth in a wide circle to the delighted shrieks of the onlookers. Normally Dean would be enjoying it all, turkey leg in one hand and beer in the other, but his stomach soured at the thought of Angel coming out of his stupor in a small wooden chute, no room to move.

The news of the king’s challenge had spread faster than a plague; posters were nailed up around the town and criers shouted the news for those who couldn’t read. Metatron’s special black stallion had proved untamable. Perhaps he was a Great Horse? Perhaps only a certain person could ride him? The king would never presume that it was him! Any number of his loyal citizens could be worthy. Would they like to try?

Damn right, they would. A line of men and women had already formed outside the arena even though the even wasn’t scheduled until the afternoon. For the low, low price of a halfpenny anyone could have a go. Added all up, though, the king was about to earn a fortune without even raising taxes.
So Sam and Dean skipped past the food stalls and other vendors, treating the day like business instead of pleasure. Dean still took the time to braid pretty orange and red ribbons into Impala’s mane and tail when they found her (or really, when she found them), and he smiled wide when they began their trick riding performance on the outskirts of the festival. They bowed, they flourished, they stood on Impala’s back as she cantered in a wide circle, and then again on their hands; they flipped and switched positions; they balanced on her spine and swung under her belly at full gallop. But not even his Baby could make Dean forget about Angel, and though they could do the routine several times without tiring, by mutual agreement the brothers stopped before midday.

When Dean thanked Impala and unbraided her hair, she wasted no time in heading back out into the country. She was never a fan of big crowds of people.

With nothing else to do, the Sam and Dean pocketed their meager earnings and wandered the labyrinth of vendors until they reached the Harvelles’ stand. Ellen, Jo, and Pam were tapping kegs and pouring all kinds of beers and ciders; there were also crates stuffed with straw protecting bottles of all kinds, holding liquors like the whiskey they’d gifted Rufus. A ledge wrapped around three sides of the stand, and the brothers squeezed in and planted their elbows on it, carving out a space. Pam was the first to notice them; she lifted her head and cocked an ear in their direction. “Is that the Winchesters?” she asked in her deep voice. She grinned so big the wrinkles deepened around her cloudy eyes.

“The two and only,” Dean quipped. He slapped a coin on the little makeshift counter.

Pam swept it up and dragged her thumb across it, easily discerning its worth. “A little too much for a couple of beers, Dean,” she said.

“How about a couple glasses of the hard stuff?” he asked.

“Maybe later,” she said, handing the coin back. “Someone’s coming.”

“What?”

“Sam!” came a cry. “Sam!”

Sam popped back up to his full height and scanned over the heads of the crowd. “It’s Kevin,” he said. “Come on.”
Dean followed his brother as he pushed through the crowd to meet him. The teenager was panting and sweaty. “Oh good,” he gasped. “Dean’s with you.” He put his hands on his knees and breathed hard.

“What’s the matter?” Sam asked.

“Bobby needs you guys,” he said. “The arena.”

They didn’t wait to hear more. Using their size and height they made good time through the crowd, Kevin slipping after them in their wake. When they got to the arena they ducked around the side of the stands were a gate was that led into the maze of the wooden fence structure. Despite the press of the people that filled both the stands and were crushed up against the outer fence, it soon became clear what the problem was: a horse was roaring in pain and fear.

Angel.

They hopped over the fences to take the quickest way to the portion of the arena that had been built overnight, the chute where Angel was now house, kicking and gnashing. Bobby, Rufus, and several hands were trying to get the horse to settle, but the stallion looked beyond reason.

“He just woke up,” Bobby called when he saw them. “He’s hurting himself!”

Sure enough, there wasn’t enough room in the chute to fully kick, or even bend his forelegs to rear, but that wasn’t stopping Angel from moving in what ways he could, ramming himself into the fence and tossing his head in fear.

“What do you need us to do?” Sam asked.

“What you can,” Bobby answered grimly.

“Let him out,” growled Dean. “We’ll make up an excuse! Something!”

“Don’t you think I already tried that, boy?” said Bobby. “Gadreel ain’t hearing it.”
“Shit,” said Dean. “Shit, shit.” He didn’t think he’d ever been so enraged in his life. Most of it was fueled by the shame that ate away inside of him, knowing that he’d helped put Angel there when he couldn’t defend himself. Wasn’t going to let him free when he most needed defending now.

“Everybody, back off!” He shoved his way to the chute, and stood at the front end of it. They’d already put a halter on the horse to make him easier to get back into the chute later. He waited for his chance and grabbed it on either side, forcing the stallion’s head down. “Hey,” he said, when he met resistance, “hey!” When Angel stopped resisting, he guided his nose to point to one side. Horses couldn’t quite see straight on, and he wanted one of those big blues trained only on his own face.

“Hey,” he said more softly. “You know me? You know me, don’t you buddy? My brother and I sleep near you. We brush you. We feed you at night. We aren’t gonna hurt you. See?”

Sam, who’d come up behind Dean, reached out a cautious hand to pet Angel’s neck. The horse tried to jerk away, but Dean held him steady. When Sam’s hand made contact, the muscle under it twitched, but after a few strokes the stallion relaxed.

“That’s not so bad, is it?” Dean smiled a little at the horse, but knew it was sad. “I’m sorry, Angel,” he said, not loud enough for the other grooms to hear. Slowly he let go of the halter, and when Angel didn’t start moving again, just looked back at Dean, he ran a hand down the horse’s nose. “I wish I could get you out of here. I wish I could. But I promise I won’t leave you. I promise. We’ll get through this together, okay?”

Angel nickered lowly, a tired, wretched sound. His eyes were full of pain.

“Gods, Dean, this is so wrong,” said Sam.

“I know, Sammy.”

But all they could do was keep their promise. They waited with Angel, who still gnashed his teeth at anyone else who came near him, especially Gadreel, who’d come back to check on the stallion. He did not try to reach for the halter twice. “The king arrives soon,” he said simply, and stood by the mechanism that would open the gate of the chute.

Not long after that trumpets sounded. The boxes for nobles were across the way, and all but the biggest of them in the center were filled. Now the curtains opened and members of the king’s guard marched out, followed by the king himself. The crowd roared its approval, and for minutes on end Metatron waved. As he did so, an entire line of Reapers—a whole dozen, a number unheard of in recent years—came in after him, and sat in a row, hooded in their black cloaks and looking like crows lined up on a wall. Then the king sat, and the applause died down.
“It’s time,” said Gadreel, and the first hopeful was guided to the chute.

Angel snorted, and started panicking again.

“I’m sorry,” said Dean, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” He and Sam hopped back onto the other side of the fence, and watched as a heavyset man climbed onto Angel’s back, laughing. Gadreel pulled a lever and the gate opened. Angel shot out into the arena and bucked once, twice: the man flew into the air. He’d barely lasted a second. The crowd broke into laughter.

Angel was not able to rest though. A group of trainers poured into the ring from every direction, cracking whips at the stallion’s feet. He shied away, and in this manner was corralled back into the chute.

Again and again people leapt onto his back and starved, hurting, still the stallion fought. He bucked with all his strength, whinnied his defiance, and each time when he was led back into the chute, Dean could have sworn that Angel sought him out every time, both pride and pleading in his eyes. Dozens of people went, scores, with hardly a break in-between them; it went on so long that any lesser horse would long have collapsed with exhaustion. And still, still no one last more than a few seconds on his back, skilled rider or no.

Finally Angel seemed to think the whips the lesser of evils, and tried breaking between two trainers. Not suspecting this, they didn’t pull their blows, and the stallion squealed in pain when they slashed across his legs, causing him to stumble.

“Bobby,” Sam pleaded, tears streaming down his face. If anyone had a chance of getting through to Gadreel, it was him.

The older man nodded, squeezing Sam’s shoulder. “Alright, kid,” he said.

But when he went up to Gadreel, the horsemaster raised a hand to forestall him. “Yes,” he said. “I believe that’s enough.” He made some signal to his trainers, who coiled their whips and backed away. He reached into his pocket, pulling out the hated pouch of powder.

“No!” said Dean.
Gadreel turned a sharp look onto the groom. “If you think you can fetch him without magical aid, go ahead.” Dean didn’t move. “You think you know better than the Royal Horsemaster? Go ahead.”

Dean curled his hands into fists. “Fine,” he said, and hopped back over the fence into the arena.

“Dean!” said Sam, reaching for him, but Gadreel pulled him back.

The crowd had been getting restless, lots of shouting and a few boos when the trainers had left the grounds. But they grew quiet again when Dean, a lone figure without a weapon in sight, started walking up to the unbreakable stallion.

Angel balked when he saw him at first, cantered around the entire perimeter of the arena. But there was no way out and the horse was so, so clearly tired. Dean simply stood in the middle and watched him, hands in his pockets.

Sure enough, when Angel found nowhere else to turn, he slowed to a walk and stopped within several feet of Dean. His own eyes filled with tears when he saw his sorry state, the sweat drenching his coat, the blood dripping from his legs. The battle between his eyes and his body language, defiance warring with defeat.

Dean waited a little longer and slowly, very slowly approached Angel. Before today, Dean had thought that no horse but Impala could have withstood something so grueling, or even be clever enough to elude Gadreel’s training as he had for the past few days. Sometimes you just feel it, the Lady Billie had said, and now he knew what she meant, because he felt it now. Angel was special like Impala was. Impala so often seemed to understand exactly what he was trying to get across to her. Maybe he could treat Angel the same way.

“I’m sorry, buddy,” he began.

Angel snorted.

“But it’s over now. Let me take you home.”

Angel blew at him, lips flapping, and stamped a hoof.
“I know, I know. But if you leave with me now, they aren’t going to touch you anymore today. You can go back to your stall, have a nice rest. I can get you water, some food. I’ll even find an apple for you, how does that sound?”

No response this time, but that also meant that as Dean drew closer, the horse didn’t back away.

“Let’s leave this place, huh?”

Angel was breathing heavily, his nostrils flared, but he let Dean take a hold of his halter. He tried tugging a little, but the stallion didn’t take the suggestion.

“I’ll do what I can for you,” he said. “Just trust me. Please.”

When he tugged again, ever so gently, Angel let out a deep sigh, and followed.

Dean shuddered in relief. He started leading him to the side of the arena, not even noticing that the crowd had erupted into cheers, clapping and stomping in the stands. All he could see was the horse in front of him, his brother running toward him with a lead to clip to the halter so they could more easily conduct the horse away. Stable hands rushed to open one of the side gates for them, and people parted giving them right of way the entire path back to the stables.
Late that night, when the revelers were still carousing but the horses were safe in the stables, Dean left Angel dozing in his stall and Sam sleeping in the loft, and went looking for a couple of apples. Luckily he was able to find a vendor still selling, and bought one each for Angel and another for Impala whenever she decided to return.

The aisles were quiet, though the reveling could still be faintly heard; there was just the sweet smell of horses and the snuffling of exhausted stable kids up in the lofts. The way was mostly lit by moonlight coming in the windows, though Dean had left a single lantern on, turned low, in their little wing. He tossed and caught the apples as he walked, pondering whether he could convince Gadreel to leave Angel alone for a day or two, or get Bobby to convince him.

But when he turned the corner, he stopped. In the small, golden pool of light left by the lantern, stood the king. No guard, no retinue, no royal cloak or silver brocade nor even a bejeweled crown: just the king in clothing as humble as any hand’s, his dark, graying curls messy and a grin on his bearded mouth. If Dean hadn’t seen him so close the day he’d first come to visit Angel, he’d never have mistaken him for the monarch at all.

“Dean Winchester,” said King Metatron. “It is Dean, right?”

“Uh,” said Dean. “Your majesty.” He sketched a clumsy bow.

“Sh,” he said, putting a finger to his lips, and smiling like they were sharing a secret. “Can’t have everyone knowing I’m wandering about by myself, now can we?”

Dean looked around. Besides horses, no one else was anywhere near. No one else conscious, anyway. “Um.”

“But let’s get straight to business!” Metatron spread his hands. “You were magnificent out there today.”

“Oh, well—”
“You know I advertised the event with Commander here—Did this stall used to belong to another horse? We need to get a nameplate to cover up these scratches—as a chance to bond with a Great Horse. That’s what I told Gadreel, too. But the truth is,” he sighed, his face drooping into disappointment, “that Gadreel hasn’t been doing his job very well. Can you imagine? My own Royal Horsemaster, unable to break a horse?” He shook his head.

“I don’t think—”

“But we’re a country made up of horse people!” Metatron interrupted, bright once again. “What could be an easier way to hold auditions than a bit of bronc riding? And you are the only one that passed.”

“Auditions for what?” he said.

The king scoffed. “Dean, what do you think? Come here.” He beckoned him forward, into the light. Cautiously Dean joined him in front of Angel’s stall. The horse was backed up as far from the door as possible, glaring intently. “Anyone,” said Metatron, “who can break this horse deserves the post of Royal Horsemaster.”

Dean clenched his jaw and looked only at Angel, not believing what he was hearing. Was the king bribing him to replace Gadreel?

“Or maybe,” the king drawled, “a knighthood? They say you’re an excellent rider.”

Dean closed his eyes, turning away.

“Yes, I thought that might be it.” He propped both of his elbows on the stall door, leaning his back against it. “Just imagine: your own suit of armor, your own squire, a pocketful of crowns, and a real bed to sleep in at night. No more waking up before dawn, no more mucking stalls, no more worrying about keeping your little brother fed.” Dean sucked in a breath and whipped his head back around. Metatron smiled and leaned closer. “You could finally put that fancy sword of yours to good use, eh?” He laughed at whatever look was on his face. “What? Don’t you think I know about all my subjects?”

“Why…” Dean swallowed. “Why me?”
The king stood back up and dropped his smile. “Because you said ‘Here, boy,’ and there he came.” He searched Dean’s eyes for a moment. He had no idea what the king saw, but it must have been something, because he stepped to the edge of the lamplight, half his face falling into darkness. “Consider my offer, Dean. I’ll give you thirty days to decide. If you agree, and you succeed, knighthood is yours.”

“And if I say no?”

Metatron shrugged. “Then you and your brother can leave. Think carefully,” he said. “Good night.”

The king slipped his hands into his pockets and left the circle of lamplight, whistling as he walked away.
Angel was given one day off.

Gadreel did not come to Horsetown the day after the festival. It was just as well; Angel was allowed to get some real sleep, and he ate his fill whenever his eyes weren’t closed. Sam and Dean were mostly involved in the clean up and reacclimating everyone to their daily routine. Dean told no one of the king’s offer, and he had hope that it wouldn’t come up again. Surely the monarch had more important things to worry about than a lowly groom, and there was no way that Gadreel could so easily be cast aside.

So he said nothing as Gadreel came down the day after and confronted him in the middle of mucking a stall. Just nodded when he said, “Bring Commander to me in the training paddock.”

At first it was no big deal. Again Gadreel tried his usual methods of training, and again Angel blocked him at every approach. And every evening before dinner the horsemaster would have Dean summoned—or Sam, if he was more readily available—to take Angel away as he headed back up to the city. Dean didn’t like bringing Angel to and from Gadreel, but it was infinitely better than his using the spell powder, and this way Angel would have more time to eat and drink.

Though Angel seemed resigned to his journeys to and from the paddock, he still did not often suffer either Winchester to touch him. After the third time he snapped at him for trying to get tangles out of his mane, Dean threw down his comb. “Fine!” he said. “But you’re not getting out of hooves.” Most days he was actually able to succeed in checking those, but not every day.

But as the autumn progressed, and Dean’s thirty day deadline dwindled into a couple weeks, the infamous patience of Gadreel was finally out-stubborned by the black stallion.

Sam and Dean were away at the time; they’d been allowed a couple days off, loading up a wagon with all the Harvelle’s empty barrels. They took turns alternately driving the wagon or riding Impala, and made decent time. They enjoyed a day in and around the Roadhouse, helping out at the bar in the busy hours and practicing with Mary’s bow and arrow using the side of the barn, or mock fighting with Jo. In the evening when the tavern was quiet, and they sat eating a hearty meal with the women, Dean sighed. He felt much more relaxed here, without feeling like the king was looking over his shoulder and watching his every move.

“Hey Sammy,” he said. “We should stick around another day. What do you think?”
“Yes!” said Jo.

“That’s sweet, boys,” said Pam. “But I think you should head on home.”

Dean opened his mouth to argue, thinking Jo and Ellen would be right there with him, but to his surprise neither did.

“She’s probably right, Dean,” Sam agreed. “I’m sure Bobby’s doing alright with Angel but I worry, you know?”

Dean did know.

He wished he didn’t.

But it was just as well they left in the morning, because as they pulled into Horsetown just as the sun was dipping down the western horizon, Bobby himself was waiting for them at the front of the stables.

“Someone else will grab the wagon,” he said. “Come with me.”

When Angel had let himself be led by Bobby that first morning they were gone, Gadreel found new hope, he told them as they walked. He tried leading him too, all of his usual tricks, over and over. So he decided maybe it was a fluke. The next day, the full day they had spent at the Roadhouse, the horsemaster had asked Rufus to lead him to the training paddock. Again, Angel let himself be led. But still, Gadreel made no headway.

Then the day after that—that very morning—Gadreel himself decided to lead Angel. But Angel would not come with him. He’d snapped at Bobby to bring the horse along, and disappeared. Bobby had a stables to run, and thinking the day would be more of the same, he’d put Angel in the paddock and gotten back to his own work. By the time he’d found out where Gadreel had gone off to, it was too late.

He’d gone to get a whip.
“I shouldn’t have left him,” Bobby lamented, and with that they turned a corner, the lamps up bright in their wing of the stables.

The door to Angel’s stall was open and unchained. Dean rushed in, and gagged at what he saw.

Angel was lying in the far corner of his stall on heaps of straw, beaten and bleeding. There were whip wheals not only on his flanks, but his legs, his neck, even a couple shallow ones on his face. But his body bore the brunt of it, thick wounds, deep and still oozing. There were scores of them. Angel looked up at him and snapped his teeth, though he wasn’t in reach.

“He still won’t let anyone near him,” Bobby said. “Supplies are to your left.”

“Sam, go get, go find some apples,” Dean ground out.

“On it.” He didn’t turn to look, but heard Sam take off running.

He dropped to his knees. His hands were shaking. He knew this had something to do with Metatron pressuring Gadreel. He must have told him some lie about Dean usurping him or—or—

“Hi, Angel,” he said. “Hey, buddy.” He scooted closer, but Angel surged half onto his feet, muscles trembling, before collapsing back into the straw, just to snap at him again. “Okay, okay.” He sat back on his haunches. Sam’s footsteps were rapidly approaching again. “When’s the last time you ate? You must be hungry.” The straw behind him crunched. “Easy, Sammy,” he murmured. Because he was the best brother in the world, he set down and entire bag of apples next to him, and then slowly back away and settled into the opposite corner from where Angel was sitting, unfolding clean linen bandages.

Dean opened the bag and searched through it, picking the biggest, ripest looking apple of the bunch. Then he he tossed it gently within Angel’s easy reach.

He snorted and turned his head away.

“You’ve gotta eat something,” said Dean. “You need the energy. How else are you going to keep fighting these bastards, huh? You wanna let them win?”
Still nothing.

“Don’t break. Don’t break on me. Please?” he asked, his voice cracking.

Angel rumbled, a deep, pained sound.

“I won’t leave you again. I promise. I’m not gonna let them touch you again.” He took a chance, crawling a foot closer. Angel kept sharp watch but didn’t move. “I have a way. I’ll do it.” Another couple of feet, hand outstretched. “You just gotta trust me. Okay?”

Angel stretched his neck, mouth reaching toward him—Dean took a sharp breath, bracing himself for the pain of a bite—but the horse just nudged it gently. He almost collapsed himself. “There you go, buddy. There you go.” Permission granted, he carefully crawled into Angel’s space, and picked up the apple. “Hungry? Can you eat anything?” The horse grumbled, but bit into it. Dean almost went to stroke his neck, before he stopped in the nick of time. Too many wounds for it to be anything but painful for the horse.
“Alright, Sam,” he said, glancing over his shoulder. “Come here.”

Sam wasted no time. They each grabbed a clean, wet cloth and started dabbing at Angel’s wounds. The horse’s muscles twitched every time they made contact, but he didn’t chase them away.

“Do you really have a way?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” said Dean. “But you won’t like it.”

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Sam did not like it.

Still, Dean didn’t go to sleep that night. As soon as everyone else was stirring and getting ready for their day, he hopped out of the loft, checked on Angel, and did no chores. Instead he marched out of Horsetown, up the northern road, navigating Mt. Heaven and climbed through the city all the way to the castle.

“Dean Winchester for the king,” he told the guards at the castle gate. “He’s expecting me.”

They gave him incredulous looks, but sent a runner to verify. After almost twenty minutes of fidgeting under their watchful eye, the gate was opened to him. An attendant in white and yellow livery beckoned him forward. “Follow me.”

The castle gates led into a large stone courtyard with the tourist royal stables on the left, and other buildings to the right. The castle was directly ahead, its massive doors already wide open as servants and members of the court went about their business. When he followed the attendant up the stone steps and inside, he gaped.

He’d never seen a room so big that had no particular function—unless this room’s function was to intimidate, in which case it succeeded. The floor was marble in various shades of white, pink, and green, inlaid with intricate geometrical designs. The walls were draped with tapestries bigger than half the training paddocks in Horsetown, depicting battles of gods and man, Angels and monsters. The entire ceiling was painted in frescoes, the gods wheeling in the heavens with the stars in both
human and animal form. He wondered how they even managed to get all the way up there.

But he couldn’t tarry, for the attendant kept going. The man led him through hallways with more tapestries, gilded furniture, life-sized statues, and empty vases. Finally he was led to a vestibule before a large set of wooden doors. “This is the throne room,” the attendant told him. “Please wait here until you are summoned.” And he left Dean alone.

The room was smaller, far smaller than the entrance hall, but still about the same as a decent-sized paddock. A tapestry covered the wall to his left, but to his right was a painting so massive the wall could barely be seen at all. It depicted King Michael in full battle armor, with enormous white wings: this was how legend had him fighting in the Final War, though there had been no reports of it from the more recent conflict. In his hands he wielded a spear, whose pointed tip was rendered polished and gleaming by the painter, though it was in the midst of battle. The weapon was pointed at a dragon, pitch black and breathing fire, a beast of Amara—long extinct, if they had ever existed. Dean could only imagine how it might have felt begging an audience from King Michael, and seeing him the righteous victor.

It was terrifying enough waiting for King Metatron.

When the doors finally opened, it seemed to be of their own accord. Dean gulped, and entered.

The throne room looked empty at first; there was a single red runner laid on the stone floor that drew the eye directly to the dais with the golden throne. On its red cushion sat King Metatron, crown on his head. “Dean!” he greeted. “Come in.”

Warily he followed the carpet to the throne. Once he entered the room properly he saw great marble columns lining either side, between which there stood more statues, but these much, much bigger than life. As he drew closer to the throne he realized there was something behind it; what he thought was plain drapery was actually a white sheet covering half an enormous statue of a winged Michael. Scaffolding was built around the other half. When he reached the dais, he was still looking up.

“Oh yes,” said Metatron. “Just a bit of renovation. But never mind that! To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Dean took a deep breath, and just came out with it. “I’ll do it,” he said. “I’ll break Commander.”
Angel

When Castiel first turned into a horse, he had no idea what he was.

There was fighting, magic flashing and spells exploding, a searing pain, a squeezing and stretching at once; the world changed color, grew muted, but somehow there was so much more of it to see. The sounds, the smells, his center of gravity tilted completely off its axis were all so overwhelming, and he ran. He ran and ran, and in his panicked state it was several minutes before he realized he was running on four legs. He tripped as soon as the thought crossed his mind, almost tumbled over, but found his balance at the last second. He lowered his head and tilted it in the long grass, lifting his hands one by one—his feet, now—and saw that they were hooves, smooth and uncloven.

He yelped, but it came out as a whinny.

Then, he knew. He was a horse.

The shock of it, on top of the grief over the death of his parents, a thousand knives in his heart, was simply too much.

He did not know how long he wandered before he came back to himself, starving and thirsty. Never before had he thought of grass as anything other than what it was, but his nose was telling him it smelled so good, so ripe and juicy, it was food, he was just so hungry and he was surrounded by food! He tried ripping it up with his hands, pawing at the ground before he remembered. Indignity upon indignity, he stuck his mouth into the grass like a dog in his bowl, and pulled.

Delicious. By the gods, it was the best meal he’d ever eaten.

When he was satisfied, the thoughts came pouring back in. Orphaned. Alone. No allies back home, he couldn’t count on it. What if Lucifer had succeeded and taken over Mt. Heaven? No, his whole country was barred to him, and the south far too dangerous. He wouldn’t get far if he went west; even if he could make his way through the high peaks of the Micharim, Lokiland was closed to outsiders. The only option was east. His aunt, the Queen Raphael, would harbor him.

But the east, it turned out, was impossible as well. The marshes were vast and impenetrable, no matter which way he tried to go. On his last attempt he’d come so close to getting stuck and drowning in mud that he had no choice but to stop.
He turned back, back into Michaeretz, a prisoner in his own land.

At first he tried to join the little bands of mustangs whenever he came across them. They would maybe let him graze near them for a day, but eventually one of them would take umbrage and move their families along, or a stallion would charge toward him in challenge. No matter how hard he tried, he could not gain an understanding with them.

People were no better. Most tried to catch him—some tried harder than others—but by the skin of his teeth he escaped their lassos, both the ropes and the magic variety, long blue white tendrils: a Reaper spell.

Alone he was and alone he remained, for twelve years wandering the prairie. There were a few villages he deemed it safe to skirt the edges of, where the poorer folk might smile or greet him, but had no desire to keep an animal they couldn’t care for. Sometimes he just needed to hear another voice, experience a sweetness, like a small blonde girl weaving daisies into his mane.

But he grew complacent, established patterns for the seasons, where the grass was greener and a kind person might be near and willing to share an apple. Wranglers caught him at last, and dragged him back to Mt. Heaven, though he kicked and screamed the whole way. From the villages he had gleaned that Lucifer had retreated and Metatron had taken the throne, but for him, that was hardly better.

Yet Metatron did not kill him, as he’d tried so very long ago. Though he wondered if that might not have been the kinder fate. Under Gadreel’s cruel eye they starved him, and harassed him, and paralyzed him so that he could not fight for himself. In those days he knew only one kindness: that of Dean and his brother Sam, who would feed him and speak to him and called him Angel, as if he were a great warrior instead of a scared horse. But still, he could not trust them. They did not stop the abuse, and they worked for Gadreel, after all.

Then came the Harvest Festival, and that terrifying hour in the ring. When he’d been led to that small cage he had been so certain he was about to be slaughtered. But Dean came, and made his promises, and called him Angel. So he tried to be strong like a warrior, like his father, but the men and women were cruel, and dug spurs into his sides, and threatened him with whips. There was no escape. He still didn’t truly trust Dean, but what else could he do? He’d rather take the word of a groom than the smiles of the tyrant laughing in the stands. When that same tyrant offered Dean the job of Gadreel, he feared that he would jump at the chance. But he did not; and Castiel’s trust grew.

Though still, neither Dean nor Sam could protect him.
The day when Gadreel used the whip, he had said such strange things, about how Castiel needed to repent, and purge the poison from his veins. The last thought he had before the pain was too great was that Gadreel knew who he was. Metatron must have told him, which meant he would never stop, and Castiel would never, ever be allowed to escape.

But then, a miracle.

The next morning Gadreel did not come for Castiel. Sam and Dean simply checked on his wounds, fed and watered him, and went on their way.

When he could walk and stand again without much pain, they led him out into the cool autumn air, and put him in a pasture with other horses. Some of them were old and in retirement; others were mothers with their foals, who gamboled about and ran between the other horses’ legs. All of them ignored Castiel, even as he was put there day after day. So he respected them, and ignored them in turn.

Instead he looked out for the Winchester brothers. He would often see them going to and fro, either leading horses or carrying equipment. When they noticed him always at the fence closest to the path, they started taking detours to see him, stroke his neck, give him a kind word when they could. Sometimes one or the other—usually Dean—would go riding by on Impala, the frankly intimidating mare who on rare occasions would sleep in the stall next to Castiel’s. She of all the horses was the only one who did not ignore him; when Dean stopped to say hello, she watched him unnervingly, and sometimes snorted. He was glad when she went on her way, though he wasn’t glad to see Dean go.

Then one day, to Castiel’s utter consternation, Impala jumped the fence into the paddock and began trotting round. First she greeted the old-timers, who nickered and nodded their heads; she stood patiently while colts and fillies wove in and out between her legs. At length he was convinced she had no interest in him, and turned back to the fence, keeping an eye out for a friendly face.

A sudden pain in his flank.

Castiel whinnied in surprise, leaping around to glare at Impala who was nickering in a way Castiel instinctively understood as laughter. He snorted at her and stamped his hoof. *Not funny!*

She tossed her head in a shrug, and trotted back to the other side of the paddock.
After a while, once he was certain there were no more tricks to be played, he sighed and hung his head back over the fence.

*Nip!*

Another sharp pain in his flank! He leaned in to bite her back, but Impala pranced easily out of his reach, and again went to the other side, lowering her head to graze.

That was all for that day, but ever subsequent day Impala would jump into the paddock and graze around for an hour, sneaking up on Castiel every time he lowered his guard. It wasn’t until he stopped putting his whole attention on Horsetown, and started using the full range of both of his eyes—a near panoramic view that had made him dizzy for years if he ever lost his focus on one thing at a time—that he could be sure whether or not she was coming. The first time she went for his flank and he snaked his head back, whinnying his annoyance, she didn’t have the grace to look caught out at all. She just looked kind of smug.

The next day, when Castiel passed her nipping test a couple more times, Impala turned back to the inside of the paddock and looked over her shoulder, waiting. Cautiously, he followed. She brought him to a corner where a couple of the foals were leaping and twisting in some kind of equine dance. She nudged his flank to go toward them. When he stubbornly refused, she went up to them herself, and joined their dance. It should have been silly, seeing such a giant horse acting like a filly, but the height of her leaps and the strength of her twists just made her look magnificent. It made her look free.
And finally, he understood.

The other horses ignored him because he was a person who looked like a horse. Impala had decided to treat him like one of her colts, and was teaching him how to be a horse.

He started listening.

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A month after Dean had officially taken over Castiel’s “training,” which had mostly involved his hanging out in a grassy paddock all day learning how to be a horse, the first snow of the season came. And with it, another visit from Metatron.

Again, he ambushed Dean outside of Castiel’s stall, when he was alone without even Impala to defend him.

“I hear you haven’t been spending much time training Commander,” the king admonished him, picking at his fingerless gloves. He was once again playing the peasant.

“He’s still healing,” said Dean.

“Don’t wait too much longer,” Metatron warned.

But Dean didn’t train him. With the snow piling up and the days growing shorter, there was less work for everyone to do. Dean started visiting the paddock more often, especially since Impala would show up more often than not. Some days she would jump in with the others, and Dean would sit on the fence and laugh at her antics. Other days he would bring out all his grooming gear, and talk to her sweetly, not afraid to swat at her when she teased him, this enormous horse that most other people wouldn’t go near.
But Metatron’s visits became more frequent, and more menacing.

“Any progress?” he’d ask, with false levity.

“We’re getting there,” Dean would say, or “I think he’s really coming around,” or “There’s two feet of snow out there, what do you want me to do about it?”

Sometimes Castiel thought Dean had no idea what it was Metatron could truly do to him if he kept disobeying. Other times he feared that Dean knew exactly, and was defending him anyway.

When winter melted into spring, and the Flower Festival had cleared out the stables of all people down to the last little stable girl, Metatron came to visit him.
“I don’t know how you do it, Castiel,” he said, a flower garland draped over his shabby coat. “You out-stubborned Gadreel and you convinced a low-born clod that you’re worth dying for.”

Castiel snorted and stamped menacingly. *Don’t you hurt him!*

“Oh, so you do care about him!” Metatron exclaimed. “You see, I wasn’t sure whether or not the bumpkin and his overgrown brother were just tools for you.”

Castiel froze, realizing his mistake.

“But my eyes and ears here weren’t lying. You’re sweet on Dean. He’s even let you off your leash a couple of times, and you didn’t run. I wonder if you even noticed?”

He had noticed, he had, but something had kept him from leaving. Something having to do with Dean’s smile, and how the muted colors in his equine vision didn’t mute the bright apple green of his eyes at all.

Or maybe it was something he was just realizing.

“Now that’s *very* interesting,” said Metatron. “I can see it in your aura, yes, there it is!” He clasped his hands together and put an exaggerated frown on his face. “And he doesn’t even know you’re a person.” He shook his head in false sympathy.

Castiel whinnied and lunged, but all Metatron had to do was take a couple steps back. “Ah, ah ah.” He wagged a finger. “Play nice, Castiel. Play nice or the Winchesters will be the ones who get broken.”

Castiel threw himself against the stall door, scraping his knees, but it held.

“I’m glad we understand each other. Good night.”

Oh, Castiel understood perfectly well. This wasn’t a warning, a chance to protect the men who have been protecting him. How could he possibly warn them, when he was a horse and they were not? He could no more warn them than act on the feelings that Metatron had brought to light. No. The king
was going to kill the Winchesters, just because they had shown him care and kindness, and now the only question was when.
Flight to the Forest

A whinny.

Dean was sitting up with knife in hand before he was even awake. It took him another split second for the dark shadow kneeling over him to coalesce into a person with their own blade, glinting in the thin moonlight that seeped through the rafters. But that was just enough time for the woman to knock his weapon out of the way and stab down. “Sam!” he grunted, grabbing her wrist and taking the punch from her other hand.

“Dean!” Sam gasped, and Dean knew he was locked in his own struggle. He saw the movement only in his periphery, heard the thumps as they tussled with their attackers, straw kicked out of the way straight to the wood.

Beneath them, both Impala and Angel were kicking up a storm and whinnying to wake the dead. Their noise was riling up the other horses. Soon the entire stables was in an uproar, five score horses stamping and neighing and kicking down their doors. It made Sam and Dean’s fight more desperate, and eerily silent within the wall of noise; Dean knew every knight and squire and page attached to the palace, studied their strengths and styles, but the masked figure was a mystery to him. The woman was an assassin, and that was one of two thoughts circling his head as he dodged and punched and convinced himself that pain was nothing; the other was that he’d been a fool. He’d been a fool to believe these last ten years could erase the previous fourteen. He’d been a fool to think he’d found a new home when the real one had burned away. He’d been a fool to dream of becoming better than a nameless, orphan vagabond. Becoming a knight. A fool to feel secure in their nest of hay that stunk of wet hide and manure, as if they’d ever been anything but expendable to people with power.

Impala roared in rage, and it stoked his own.

He yelled in answer, a scream from deep down inside of him, in his hidden depths, the part that was still the boy watching his parents die. If this was to be his end, then he would live up to their legacy: he would fight. He would kick, and grab, and gouge out her fucking eyeballs until his last breath.

Then there was no thought at all. He took his rage and his pain and poured it into his limbs, lashing out at the assassin with all his strength and speed. She was agile and very quick, darting in and out of his space to land her blows, but he had become a force of nature, and more, those late nights and early mornings of training gave him an endurance not needed for slashing sleeping throats; the dark-clad woman began to show weakness and could not block all his attacks. She grew nervous, no longer carrying herself with surety; she was no longer on the job. She was fighting for her life.
“WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON, HERE?”

Bobby’s deep bellow reached them even in the loft, above the cacophony of horses, and Dean saw the whites of the assassin’s eyes within her mask. Her professional instinct was to disappear at the threat of discovery, but she couldn’t disengage from such a frantic fight. Dean’s fist was moving toward her temple as if drawn there, taking advantage of that single moment of distraction: it connected. The blow stunned her for just long enough for him to punch her again, and again.

She went down.

Without pause Dean threw himself toward his corner of the loft, and lifted his father’s sword from where it was buried in the straw. Still imbued with desperate strength, he grabbed the second assassin by his collar and yanked him from where he’d pinned Sam to the floor. Dean tossed him toward the wall. The assassin recovered and turned, but Dean was already on him; elbow and forearm he pressed to his ribs, the edge of his blade to the man’s neck. One of the assassin’s hands scrabbled for purchase, but his other arm hung loose at his side—dislocated or broken. Breathing heavily, Dean looked into his eyes, which were wide with fear. They were a dark color, made darker by the night. But he could see them. A thin trickle of blood slipped down the assassin’s throat.

“Dean,” said Sam, urgently. More voices rose with Bobby’s downstairs.

Dean yelled again, but this time to protest his own weakness. He withdrew his sword from the man’s neck, flipped it, and knocked him out with the pommel. “Grab your things, Sammy,” he said.

His brother didn’t argue.

Even after all these years, neither of them had much of value. They had their father’s sword and their mother’s bow; all else could be replaced. The fear and the fight coursed through them still, their blood and bruises rendered to nearly nothing as they climbed quickly down the ladder into chaos. Grooms, pages, squires, and even knights had come running at the sound of the horses’ distress, and the horses themselves showed no sign of calming; stall doors were opened or knocked down, the animals were bolting to the exits, and the unlucky were trampled underfoot. Despite the pandemonium Dean’s eyes were drawn immediately to Impala, nearby and fending off the several people trying to lasso her. With a snarl Sam and Dean both jumped to defend her, knocking aside the men and women who dared to touch their beloved mare, who, they knew well, could have been the first to escape. But she had waited.

“Go round up the ones who actually bolted, you idjits,” and Bobby was there, helping them shove people aside, and suddenly they were alone in the protected space beneath Impala’s watchful eye—
and deadly hooves.

“Bobby,” said Sam, his voice breaking, “they tried—they tried to—”

“I know, son,” he answered, his own eyes glistening. He put one rough hand on Sam’s bloody cheek, and the other on Dean’s. He took a moment to look at each of them. Then, “Take Angel with you when you go.”

“What?” asked Dean.

“I said take Angel with you, boy, and go. Go now!”

In Bobby’s words Dean heard the echo of his mother’s voice, and he was surprised to find he had enough heart left for more of it to break. But just like twelve years ago, he didn’t let it slow him down. He saw the large black bulk of Angel over Bobby’s shoulder, ears and eyes twitching to take in the storm of people and horses all around. It was a miracle he hadn’t bolted, but Dean didn’t have time to wonder at it. He pushed past Bobby and tried to calm himself, for Angel’s sake. “Sorry, buddy, but you gotta let me,” he said, and jumped onto his back.

The stallion lifted his forelegs off the ground, just a little bit, and pranced in surprise, but did not try to buck him off. Impala bolted past them with Sam low on her back, and Dean barely squeezed his legs before Angel was hot on her hooves. They galloped down the wide aisle of the stables, and woe betide anyone who got in Impala’s way, man or beast; they stumbled and jumped aside to clear the way for her, a battalion unto herself. When they reached outside, they didn’t slow, but seemed to gain speed now with the brightness of moon and stars to guide them.

“Stop!” came a man’s shout. “Traitors! Traitors to the crown!”

Many horses had scattered to the winds, but not all: more hoofbeats thundered onto the plain behind them. Pursuit.


Something whistled by and exploded several feet to the right. There was a bright white-blue flash and a bubble of smoke, which just missed them. A stun spell. Impala swerved to the left and headed due south, away from Mt. Heaven, and Dean allowed himself a little relief when Angel imitated the maneuver; it mean he’d bonded enough with Impala that he’d actively try to stick to her. He was under no illusions that he’d have any control over their direction himself.
A few more stunners got close, but no horse could match Impala for speed, not even her children. Angel must have been made of similar stuff, because every time she put on an extra burst of speed the stallion matched it. Coupled with their black coats, dark against the velvet of night, their pursuers were soon left behind.

They didn’t slow.

***

For the rest of the night, the horses kept going. In the past, when Sam and Dean had needed a quick getaway, Impala could trot with both of them on her back for miles and miles, and it seemed the intervening years of plenty hadn’t changed that. But by the time the sun was just beginning to make itself known to their left, spreading rosy fingers across the vast sky, Angel could no longer keep up. His hide was soaked with sweat, and his chest heaved with massive breaths. Angel dropped to a walk, then stumbled to a stop.

“Sammy!” Dean shouted.

Impala slowed and turned. She walked over to them with Sam, who looked tired but alert. “He had it?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Dean sighed, swinging a leg over and slipping to the ground. Angel didn’t seem to notice. He stayed standing where he was, head hanging so low his nose was deep in the long grass and almost touching the ground. The barrel of his chest swelled in and out like bellows. Dean ran his hand along the horse’s sweaty neck, and the stallion lifted his head a little to look at him with those strange blue eyes, so wide and sad-looking that Dean was suddenly moved.

This horse, this beautiful, mean, proud fucking horse, who never once let a person stay on his back long enough to crow they’d done it, had carried Dean for at least five hours to the point of exhaustion. He dropped to his knees and cradled Angel’s head, resting his own against it. Tears pricked his eyes. “I’m sorry, buddy, I’m sorry,” he said. “You did good. Thank you. You did so good. I had to. I’m sorry.”

He knelt there a few moments longer, trying to keep himself from flying apart with all that had happened during the night. They weren’t out of the woods yet. After their years of wandering Impala surely knew the country’s terrain better than Sam and Dean did, and had, by memory or instinct, avoided any town or village on the journey. But before much longer they would need water, lots of
water for both man and horse, and food if they were able to find it. As if she shared his thought, Impala nudged his back with her muzzle. Dean took one last deep breath and stood to face, allowing himself to nuzzle her soft, sensitive nose like he had as a boy. “Whaddaya say, Baby, can you carry both of us, like you used to?”

She nickered in reply, that sweet little nicker that she seemed to save just for him.


Sam rolled his eyes, but complied, scooting far enough back for Dean to have space to mount. After some jostling—Sam and Dean were both a lot bigger than the last time they’d ridden together—Impala started walking again.

Angel didn’t follow.

Impala stopped and looked back at him, impatient. But the stallion barely looked at her. With the slightest touch of Dean’s heel, Impala turned around again, and without further prompting, nipped at Angel’s flank. Angel blew air in displeasure, sidestepping a couple times, but moved no further. Impala had to go after him twice, three times, before the tired horse relented and started trotting again.

And so their little band kept going.

***

A few hours later, their brisk trot brought them from the gentle rolls of the plains to inclines that could generously be called hills. In their years of wandering, this would be the landscape that would signal to Dean that they should turn around and head elsewhere. But he twitched neither foot nor hand to adjust Impala’s direction. The region of Winchester was still a long way from recovery after the Border War, and its desolate hills were their best chance at escape.

The northern reaches of the province were healthy, at least. The grass was just as thick and green, and given it was late spring, the run off from the mountains should be strong enough all the creekbeds would be full. Sure enough, Impala led them over the next crest, and there below in the dip between the hills, a rill ran like a glittering ribbon from west to east. Angel shot out from behind them and cantered down to the muddy bank, and promptly shoved his nose into the water. Impala followed in a more stately manner, but didn’t bother waiting for Sam and Dean to dismount to begin
drinking her own fill. Parched himself, Dean went a little upstream and knelt, lifting the cool, clear water to his mouth. Sam did the same.

Trying to pace himself, Dean groaned and let himself fall onto his back, practically spreadeagled on the ground. The horses may have been doing most of the work, but riding was hell on the human body, too, especially the lower half. Sam sat back on his heels and looked to his right where, if they traveled a few hours in that direction, the Micharim would begin to make themselves known on the horizon. They’d only seen the mountains a couple of times, but there was not much succor there for penniless, starving boys, and the terrain wasn’t great for Impala’s feet.

To their left, Angel let out a large sigh and laid down, too. Impala stood still, and began nibbling on the grass. Though Dean knew her well, and saw her ears and eyes moving enough to know she was still aware of their surroundings. He trusted her and closed his own eyes. The sky was mostly clear and the sun was warm on his face.

“We can’t stay long,” said Sam.

Dean grunted. “I know.”

A beat.

“They called us traitors,” Sam said softly. “Did you hear?”

“Metatron.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sam, but not like it was his final assessment. Dean waited him out. At length he said, “Why Angel?”

Dean cracked an eye. “Hm?”

“Why did he want Angel broken so badly? Badly enough he wanted us out of the way? It makes no sense.”

The kid had a point. Dean hoisted himself onto his elbows and looked at the horse in question. He
was lying still, except for his steadied breathing, and his head was hanging low, with half-lidded, sleepy eyes. His dark coat shimmered in the sunlight, but that was mostly due to sweat. The stallion didn’t look like much at the moment—certainly not compared to the magnificence of his Baby—but compared to any other horse he would be of a good height, decently muscled, healthy hooves and teeth. Like Impala he was a pure black, except for the perfectly round white star in the middle of his forehead, which was pretty but not necessarily unusual. The most unusual thing about him was his bright blue eyes, a darker shade than you saw in horses, and certainly a color you rarely saw in ones with dark coloring. Though…horses had a range of smarts just like people, and Angel did seem to be quite sharp. And he could probably out-stubborn anyone or anything in the whole of Michaeretz, if not Chamara.

A trait like that could make a bag of dicks like Metatron double down like a it’s a challenge. But Sam was right that murder was taking things beyond reason. Dean had been expecting to get thrown out, but assassins? He sat up fully. Angel raised his head a little at the movement, and looked back at him. For ten years, ten years Metatron had been on the hunt for black stallions. But Angel seemed to satisfy his desire before he’d ever proven so difficult to break. The king hadn’t been looking for any black stallion, he’d been looking for this stallion.

“Shit,” Dean muttered.

“Whatever he wants, I don’t think he’ll stop,” said Sam.

“I’m getting that.” Dean moved up into a crouch, and half-stepped his way over to Angel at a measured pace. When the horse gave no indication he should stop, he settled next to him in the mud, and reached to pet him. Angel sighed and let his eyes go half mast again. “What’s going on, Angel, huh?” Dean asked, scratching behind the stallion’s jaw. The horse gave a desultory snort.

A few minutes later, Sam stood and stretched. He shrugged off the small bag he’d been carrying on his back and pulled out an empty waterskin. Dean sighed. He scooted around to Angel’s hooves and inspected them. “Got a pick in there?” Sam dug into the bag and tossed one over. He caught it with one hand and got to work delicately cleaning each one. Angel made some disgruntled noises, but Dean had no sympathy. “You know you’ll feel better when I’m done,” he admonished him. Thankfully the horse stopped short at kicking.

When he finished with Angel he groaned and stood on his sore legs. “Your turn, Baby.” Impala placidly continued refueling with the grass, and gave Dean no trouble as he cleaned her hooves in turn. “They’re good to go.”

Sam packed everything back up, made sure Mom’s bow was secure on his back. “I’m ready.”
Dean went over to Angel and patted his rump. “Come on, up.” The horse glared. “Up.” He clicked his tongue.

Angel turned his head away in clear dismissal.

There was really no moving a two ton animal if he didn’t want to be moved. So Dean rolled his eyes at Sam and nodded across the little creek. Sam shrugged, and they hopped on Impala’s back one at a time. With a soft touch of his heel to tell her they were ready, Impala waded through the stream and started trotting away. “Goodbye, Angel!” Dean called behind him.

They waited twenty seconds, thirty, as they trotted south. Finally an irritated whinny sounded across the little valley, and there was the unmistakable sound of hooves splashing through water. The Winchesters turned to watch Angel canter a little to catch up, before he took his place right behind the mare.

“Oh, so nice of you to join us,” said Dean.

Angel blew air at him, lips flapping, for all the world as if he’d understood the sarcasm.

***

As they rode further into Winchester, they began to see signs of the Border War. Usually it was just large swaths of land where Hellfire had spread in battle, and none but the hardiest of weeds had popped up in the scorched earth, even these dozen years later. But once in a while they’d come across an abandoned village—they were still avoiding the inhabited ones—and those that hadn’t burned were just as depressing. The shoddier of the cottages were half caved in and sagging, while plants and animals alike had taken over, vines cracking walls and nests stuffed in every cranny.

By the time the westering sun was just touching the horizon, the burned patches were becoming more frequent. When dusk began to pull a veil over the land Dean felt, with a shudder of his heart’s broken pieces, where Impala was headed. And when she slowed to a walk, he knew.

“Is it—?” whispered Sam.

Dean didn’t answer. Over the next crest a very large area of burnt land came into view, the small remnants of stone chimneys sticking up like broken teeth out of the ground. Their village.
But Impala stopped before they reached it, right at the edge of a smaller patch that was several feet across.

His throat stuck, Dean slid ungracefully from Impala’s back, almost kicking Sam in the process. He stumbled to the edge and knelt, hands landing right in the dirt. It felt like normal dirt, but how could that be?

“Dean? What is it?” Sam dismounted and walked up behind him.

Dean had to swallow a couple times before he was able to sound out the answer. “I think it’s—I think it’s where Mom and Dad died.”

Sam inhaled sharply. After a moment he knelt next to Dean, placed one of his own hands in the dirt.

Dean dug his fingers in deep, curled them into fists. No bones; if there’d been any left over after the fire, scavengers must have taken them. He felt bile rising up his throat, and shook.

“Tell me,” said Sam. Dean could hear the tears in his voice without having to look. “Tell me again.”

“You couldn’t move, because of the Demon’s spell,” Dean began. Sam had never been able to remember anything after seeing the Demon’s face, looking into his yellow eyes, and inhaling the magic powder. One of the few things Dean ever thanked the gods for. “But some of you must have still been in there, because damned if you’d let go of Mom’s bow. I got you onto Impala but she didn’t go far, and…” He took a moment for a few shaky breaths. It felt so much more real, more visceral today than it had in a long time. “And they told me to go.” His voice broke, but he didn’t allow more than a couple tears to fall. Angel came up around the other side of the patch, and eyed them in concern. Horses never did like when humans got upset. “Impala galloped like the wind, but the Demon still chased after us, using magic to get closer. Mom and Dad hung on, fighting him. And they got him, Sammy. For us.” That they died in the endeavor never needed to be spoken.

“And they burned,” murmured Sam. “You never told me they burned.”

“Them and the rest of the village.”
In a sense, what their parents had done was one of the greatest deeds, sung or unsung, in all of Michaeretz. On the battlefield, so the reports came, it took entire companies of soldiers or at least three strong Reapers to take out a Berserker Demon. This one had been brought down by two commoners and a couple of well-placed hooves. But there had been nothing heroic about it. Dean had seen it. It had been as dirty, as ignoble a death as he could imagine. And what was their reward? An unmarked pile of dirt in an area people avoided out of a wish to forget.

That Dean had avoided.

And that he must leave, again.

In one swift movement, he stood and skirted around the edge of the patch, patting his hands free of the dirt. He walked toward the village’s remains, not caring whether Sam or the horses followed. With long strides he soon reached the first of the jumbled piles of stones, but walked past them still. Those stones had been the well in the village center. And that large pile, the hearth in the smithy. And past the last of the cottages of the single dirt path, another hill, mostly burnt, with its own little pile of stones to mark where a chimney had once stood.

On the top of this hill, he stopped. The last time he’d been there, he’d been under the roof of their modest little cottage, where they all shared a table, and a bed, and a deep love for one another.

He did not move until Impala nudged him with her nose. She nuzzled under his chin. He held out for one more moment before throwing his arms around her neck and hiding his face in her mane. Vagabonds all over gain; orphans anew. But they had to carry on. What else was there?

First things first. Water, and food. The horses would need grass so they needed to go past the burnt area. The broken well in the old village was no doubt useless, so they’d have to press on another mile to a creek Dean remembered drinking from and bathing in, once upon a time. He dropped his arms and sighed, lifting his head. Dusk was dropping swiftly into night, and the brightest stars already shone above.

Sam must have known where he was headed, because he made no comment as he followed him silently down the southern side of the hill that had once been theirs. Impala walked next to them; Angel trailed behind. It wasn’t long before the grass was growing again, green and strong. Soon enough they reached the little creek, which somehow looked smaller than he remembered. He didn’t think on it much. Nothing here was as he remembered.

After drinking and washing their hands and faces, Sam and Dean took in the terrain, and quietly discussed their options. There wasn’t much cover in such a land, but there was a spot where a few
small hills met close together, and settling in the dip between them was the best shelter they were likely to find. “I’ll take first watch,” said Dean, when they’d come to an agreement. Sam shrugged, looking as drained as Dean felt.

His brother laid down, using his small pack for a pillow. Dean sat a little ways up one of the hills, low enough that he still had some cover, though high enough he had some line of sight. Impala and Angel were both grazing not too far off, refueling after a grueling night and day’s trek. The last of the light faded to the west, even as he watched; there was naught but the moon and stars to shine a meager light upon the landscape. Even then, some clouds rolled in, casting extra shadows upon the grass, the horses, Sam’s face. Dean watched them pass in and out, listened to the horses tearing and grinding down the grass, the insects buzzing and snapping. The breeze was gentle but it grew steadily colder, the last vestiges of winter chill making themselves known while the sun slept.

It felt like it had been a week since Dean had slept, though it had only been a day. But the old fear, the constant anxiety from their days of wandering rose up inside him as if it had never truly gone. And maybe it hadn’t. Because that niggling, nervous energy kept his eyes open and senses alert. He had to protect himself, and Sam, and the horses, and reached to fulfill that goal with every fiber of his being. And so he sat without moving, even as Angel ambled near Sam and laid down for a deeper sleep. Impala stilled several feet away, head drooped low, dozing.

And still, Dean watched.

The stars wheeled slowly across the sky.

The moon was veiled, and revealed, and veiled again.

The breeze rustled the tall grass.

It was hours later, deep in the dead of night, when Impala suddenly lifted her head to the north. Dean whipped his head to where she was looking, right between two of the hills surrounding them, a dark gateway to the rest of the world. At first, he saw and heard nothing. But then, a shape shimmered in the feeble starlight and as it came closer, resolved itself into a pale horse. Atop the horse rode a cloaked figure. The mantel was black but covered with runes that shone silver when the moon caught them just right. A cloud passed; the runes faded and sparked again.

A Reaper.
Dean stood and drew his sword. At the soft sound of the blade against the sheath, Angel startled awake, and Sam with him. Sam swiftly cocked an arrow in his bow but did not draw, seeing that neither Dean nor Impala were advancing. Angel stamped nervously.

The rider stopped their horse several feet away. Slowly, they lifted their gloved hands and pulled back their hood. It was the Lady Billie. “Nice night for it,” she said, in her deep, measured tone.

Dean’s heart was pumping wildly, but he didn’t move. In a full out fight there was no beating a Reaper of her caliber. But why wasn’t she attacking? Were there any others, hidden in the shadows? He swallowed and licked his lips. “Lady Knight,” he acknowledged.

“Groom,” she replied. As if he needed the reminder that the differences between them were a gaping chasm. She did not dismount. “What are you doing in the middle of nowhere with two of the king’s horses, and a weapon drawn against his warrior?”

“Getting jumped by assassins makes a man pretty cautious,” he said.

The Reaper raised an eyebrow. “Assassins? That’s what you’re going with?”

“Come on,” he said, patience worn thin with lack of sleep and the promise of battle. “You really think that after ten years, Sam and I would just up and split out of nowhere?”

“Treason would be a good motivator.”

“We’re not traitors!” said Sam, anger clear in every line of his body.

“What secrets would we have to sell?” Dean added. “How many apples His Majesty’s steeds are allowed?”

Lady Billie eloquently spread her hands. “Fleeing south does make it look suspicious.”

“Lucifer killed our parents,” Sam snarled. “We would never ally ourselves with him!”
Dean risked coming closer to stand by Sam’s side. “We fled south because this region is empty.”

The Reaper tracked him but made no move in response. “You fled south,” she corrected, “because it’s your home, Sam and Dean Winchester. How do you think I found you?” She let that sink in before continuing. “Of course, His Majesty has sent Reapers and companies in all directions. He is very keen to find you.”

“Keen to find Angel, you mean,” Dean retorted.

“Yes, it’s possible he would be less adamant if you’d simply taken the mare. So why risk stealing him?”

“You know how he was being treated.”

“I know a lot of things,” she said sharply. “I know none of you are quite what you seem to be. Not you, Dean, nor you, Sam, and not the horse you rode in on either. And now Angel, too.” She turned her gaze on each of them as she spoke, before settling on the stallion. “King Metatron wants him because of it. But what I don’t know is why.”

Dean couldn’t imagine what she meant about all of them; Sam and Dean weren’t horse whisperers no matter what other people said. There was nothing magical about treating horses with respect. Angel would have responded to anyone who’d shown him an once of kindness.

“If you’re talking to us,” said Sam carefully, “you’re willing to believe us.”

“I am a knight, Sam,” the Lady Billie said. “I have sworn my loyalty to the crown and kingdom of Michaeretz. But,” she paused. The word hung in the air. The breeze slowed as if nature itself were holding its breath. “I am talking.”

Dean sheathed his sword and displayed his empty hands. “Dean,” Sam hissed. Angel snorted and shifted restlessly. Billie’s horse, Scythe, tossed his head and stamped in response. She soothed him without taking her eyes off Sam and Dean, her gloved hand moving like a shadow along his pale neck.

“We have done nothing to betray this country,” said Dean. “Impala was never bought by the king. Her services as broodmare were a trade for her food and lodging. We worked for the same. And
Angel…” Dean swallowed. “They would have killed him. They were willing to kill us.”

The Reaper studied them for a moment longer, still stroking her steed. “The both of you are fools,” she said at last, “and understand less of what’s going on that I do.”

“Then help us,” Sam pleaded.

“I can’t protect you,” she told him, in her even way. “By morning someone else will have the same bright idea I had, and come looking for all the burned villages to find yours. I suggest you be gone by then, if you want a chance.”

Dean huffed an incredulous laugh. “We’re sitting ducks no matter where we go. If you won’t help us, what chance do we have?”

“I don’t know, Dean,” she said, setting her hood back over her curls, blocking her face from the moonlight. “What chance would you have?” She snapped her fingers, and was gone.

A moment of silence.

“The gods DAMNIT!” Dean shouted. He turned on his heel and began pacing. “Why didn’t she just fucking kill us? Why is she playing with us?” He dug his hands in his hair. “It makes no sense!”

“Wait,” said Sam. “Dean, listen.”

“What?” he snapped. The horses turned their heads to follow him as he strode back and forth in the clearing.

“You said ‘What chance do we have?’”

“I know what I said, Sammy.”

“So she should’ve said, ‘I don’t know, what chance do you have?’”
“She fucking did!”

“No, she said ‘I don’t know, what chance would you have?’”

Dean stopped pacing and whirled to face Sam, hands on his hips. “What’s your point?”

“My point is you said we’re sitting ducks and she said ‘would you.’”

Dean lifted his arms and dropped them back down to his sides.

“The woods, Dean. I think she was trying to tell us our best chance is to go into the Greenwood.”

“The- The Greenwood? Because she said something a little weird you think we should go into the Greenwood Forest? Shit, Sam.” He flopped down and sat where he stood, burying his face in his hands.

Sam took a seat next to him. “Whether she meant it or not, it’s our best option. Think about it. It’s at least two days to the mountains, we’d have to cross the entire breadth of the country to reach the Eastern Marshes, and north isn’t an option. We can’t stay out in the open like this. If we left now we could reach the Greenwood by evening tomorrow and then we can figure things out from there.”

Dean lifted his head. “Sounds great, Sam,” he said. “Oh, wait, what about the Demons?”

“That’s just rumors.”

“Smoke, fire.”

“Just think about it, Dean,” Sam finally snapped, the day catching up with him. “Get some rest and I’ll take next watch, okay?”

“Fine,” Dean muttered, and curled up where he sat.
By the time dawn came, there was no choice.

A snatch of breeze ruffled through Sam and Dean’s hair, and danced under the horses’ noses. Impala pulled to such a hard stop that Sam grasped for her mane, and Angel tossed his head, prancing nervously in place. Their eyes swiveled to look behind them, and with sinking dread the brothers turned their heads to do the same. The hills were flattening out closer to the river valley, but they were still elevated enough that the forest appeared a thick, green carpet below them, stretching to the south as far as they could see. Behind them rose the hill they’d just descended. And on the crest of that hill, as they watched, a group of cavalry appeared, their helmets with horsehair plumes capturing the early morning light. At the head was a Reaper, clad in the black-silver cloak of their office, and the whole world quieted as they lifted a single gloved hand.

They brought it down, and the world jumped into motion.

Impala bolted toward the trees, Sam low on her back, and Dean barely had time to hang on before Angel was hot on her heels. Their hooves ate up the remaining distance as they thundered into the valley, the soldiers’ shouts tumbling in their wake. As the ground evened out, their horses put on an extra burst of speed, practically springing off the rich soil in their gallop. The tall grass grew shorter, less thick, and though it meant less to slow the horses, it also meant—

**BOOM**

A Stunner exploded, but several lengths yet behind them. Two more followed in quick succession, but it did nothing more than to spur Angel and Impala on. The wind whistled past Dean’s ears, the horses’ hooves pounded in a frantic beat, but he could still hear something, right at the edge of his senses, like a low voice in a locked room. Then louder it came, and louder, a woman’s voice chanting, chanting, a litany of singular, strong syllables that pulsed with power.

Battle magic.

Though still keeping low over Angel’s neck, Dean risked a look behind. Their pursuers had just begun galloping down the last of the inclines into the valley, but the Reaper was ahead of them, and gaining speed. Her hood had been ripped back in the wind, and long dark hair flowed like a banner behind her. Lady Tessa. Her chanting continued, filled the sky with its impossible volume, clanging with layers deep and rumbling, felt more than heard. She began to glow with a Reaper’s blue-white
power, and her pale horse roared as it was imbued with the same light. Horse and rider galloped faster and faster with every stride, and within a blink she reached the flat valley while her cohort still had half the distance to go.

The chanting stopped, their skulls ringing with its echoes. But still, she was gaining on them, eating up the distance with supernatural speed, glowing brighter than the nascent sunlight.

“SAM!” Dean yelled in warning. He dug his heels into Angel’s flanks, as he rarely ever did with a horse, and though the stallion was at his limit, he pushed just that much more, pulling almost even with Impala.

Sam threw a quick look over his shoulder and understood their predicament in an instant. But there was no more urging their horses faster: they had reached the trees.

At first, the trees were spread apart, allowing the horses to run abreast with no issue. But then the grass dwindled to nothing, and the trees grew closer together so that they had to split apart, galloping
parallel lines between the trees as they grew thicker. In less than a minute they were blocking the
feeble early morning light, and they were plunged into darkness so quickly that Sam and Dean had to
guide their steeds with subtle twitches of their legs and feet, warning them of branches and roots their
slower-to-adjust eyes could not yet discern. They couldn’t risk another look behind, not even when
Tessa’s voice rang out, one syllable at time, causing small rumbles followed by the crack of
splintering wood.

Despite their desperation, despite their need, the forest proved both friend and foe. The further in
they fled, the slower the horses could run, now cantering as they dodged branches and jumped over
fallen trunks. At least it meant that the Reaper, too, had to slow. Birds burst out from above them,
squawking at the disturbance, and leaves fluttered to the ground as they crashed by.

**BOOM**

Another Stunner, this one catching on a tree trunk somewhere between him and Sam, close enough
that this time he could smell acrid hints of ozone and burnt feathers. The Speed spell had already
done its damage: Tessa was near.

[insert enochian here]

Near enough that Dean could hear the new chant without it growing preternaturally loud. It was a
smaller spell, and one he’d heard before. One everyone in the royal stables had heard whenever
they’d been tapped to help bring in mustangs for their growing livery.

“Lasso!” cried Sam.

But what could they do but keeping running?

The Reaper growled the last word of the spell, and Dean had to trust Angel to keep his footing, he
had to. He looked back, and though Tessa could not be seen, the Lasso spell snaked through the
trees behind them, several blue-white ropes of smoke and light grasping for their horses. By nature
the spell could reach a long distance and they were far, far too close. There was no outrunning it.
Sensing their prey, the magic tendrils spread around them and circled back, closing in on the horses’
legs.

“NO!” Dean shouted, and braced for impact.
But Angel ran right through the ropes, black legs gliding through the blue-white smoke which could find no purchase. Dean barely had a moment to be shocked before Impala let out a terrifying whinny. His gaze snapped up to the right to see Impala still running, but a single tendril had wrapped around her back left leg, and was not letting go. The other ropes, stymied, whipped around between the trees and tried grasping for her other legs, striking like snakes and curling like vines. Finally she stopped, dancing in place, agilely lifting one hoof after the other, but it was too late. In a sudden surge of strength, she reared and bucked, as she never, never once had done to the brothers, and tossed Sam from her back.

Dean, barely noticing that Angel had stopped too, stumbled to the ground and raced to them, his family, uncaring of the magic which touched him not, and the Reaper he still couldn’t see. Sam was already standing back up so Dean wasted no time in drawing his sword and bringing it down on the nearest tendril. It parted the smoky substance, which instantly reformed and tried again for Impala, his mare, his beloved Baby. Sam tried too, and Angel seemed to be stamping on them—why hadn’t the stallion spooked and run?—but there was no use. The tendrils snapped around Impala’s legs, one by one, and Impala stopped trying to get away. Her whole body heaved with quick breaths, and sweat foamed across her coat, but she nuzzled Sam. Nuzzled Dean, who placed a hand on either side of her massive head.

“I’ll stay with you, Baby,” he promised. “Sam, take Angel and go.”

“No way, Dean,” Sam said.

Metatron couldn’t have all of them, not all of them. “GO!” he screamed, spearing his brother with a glare that contained all his rage, all his anguish.

“We go together or not all,” Sam replied, every inch of his frame taut with an answering anger.

The sound of hooves pounding through the underbrush.

Impala backed out of Dean’s grasp. “Baby—” She bared her teeth when he tried to step closer again. “What—?” With a mighty roar she reared, the blue-white ropes stretching as she kicked up her front legs. Then she pivoted her landing, and galloped away, parallel to the forest’s edge, drawing the magic tendrils along with her.
“No!” he shouted, running after her. “No no no no no—”

Even though she couldn’t reach full speed, Dean was still no match for her, but damned if he wasn’t going to try. He followed the blue-white trail, so bright in the dark forest, and then somebody was on him, grabbing him, a large hand pressing hard against his mouth to muffle his yells—

“Shh, Dean, Dean it’s me, shh, shh.”

Sam. It was Sam dragging him away from Impala, how dare he?! Dean elbowed him, stomped on his foot, but the tenacious bastard just held tighter, pulling him behind a tree.
Not a moment too soon: the Lady Tessa appeared at the end of the magic ropes, holding them in one hand like massive, glowing reins. She thundered past them in the darkness. The brothers stood frozen in their meager hiding spot; as soon as her horse’s hoofbeats faded, those of her cohort began. Knights and cavalrmen, about a dozen all, came crashing through the forest in her wake, following her through the trees like a will o’ the wisp. They, too, had had to spread out, and they stormed on either side of them, a whirlwind of shouts and clanking armor, and then they were past them, and then they were gone.

Dean elbowed Sam again, and this time he let go. So Dean started running again; the other horses had a left a trail that anyone could follow, that Dean could follow even with the spots blinking in his eyes, aftershocks of magic light.

“Stop!” Sam hissed, making chase, but Dean wasn’t going to let anyone stop him this time. They were going to take his Baby, they were going to do to her what they did to Angel, but Dean wouldn’t let them. He wouldn’t let them!

But then there was Angel, leaping out in front of him. Dean jerked so hard to get out of the way he fell, face and hands in the forest dirt. “What the fuck?” He wrenched himself to his feet and tried to give the stallion a wide berth, but every time he feinted left or right, the horse blocked him. His blue eyes flashed and he stamped his hoof, posturing. “Get out of my WAY!” Dean growled.

“Dean—” Sam tried again, trying to turn him around.

He shrugged him off. “Angel, gods damnit!”

Just then another roar sounded in the distance. Impala, he would recognize her anywhere. Other horses neighed, answering the challenge. They were fighting, gods, they were fighting, and Dean wasn’t there. Whenever he’d needed her, from the first day they’d met, Impala had always been there for him, always, and now in her time of need he couldn’t reach her, they were hurting her, they were going to kill her oh gods what if they kill her?!

“You have to be quiet, Dean! Dean!” It was Sam. Shaking him. He hadn’t even known he’d been crying out, calling for Baby.

“We can’t leave her, we can’t!” he pleaded.

Tears were running down Sam’s face, too, but his jaw was set. “It’s too late.”
“No—”

“It’s too late, Dean!” Sam manhandled him over to Angel, who now was still. Dean tried to stop him, tried to protest, but felt himself weak. Sam tossed him onto Angel’s back, a feat that would have impressed him any other day, but now it was all he could do to get his leg swung over. Leaping up behind him, Sam clicked his tongue before they were even settled. Then angel was off, cantering deep into the woods, until they became so thick he slowed to a trot.

When even that was too much, he walked.

And so the fugitives lost themselves in the darkness.

***

For hours, Angel bore them on his back. He was strong, but he was no Impala, and after their long flight the strain was very telling. But he did not stop, and neither Sam nor Dean suggested it. They rode in silence.

The Greenwood Forest had come by its name honestly. Now that the sun was high over head, beams of light came cascading down through the branches, dappling all beneath the canopy. This far south, spring was in full swing, and the leaves were thick and green as emeralds. Moss crawled up trunks, bushes and flowers scattered around the grand columns. Birds called to each other and pecked for food, knocking hard against wood. Rodents hopped across their path and skittered up and down trees; a large spider slid down on its silk over their heads. Dean smacked it away.

There was no water. No grass for Angel. Some bushes had what might be edible leaves or seeds, but they would have to take a look. Neither man bothered.

They walked.

The light slanted more, little by little, with the sun’s passage. It grew dim.

Then slowly, it grew brighter.
A rushing sound, soft at first.

Angel, smart horse, had somehow turned his nose straight south, and led them to the Voda.

They followed the sound of the water tumbling strong with the mountains’ runoff. The trees didn’t thin much, so it wasn’t until they were practically on top of the river that they could take in its immensity. They came out from under the canopy and found themselves standing on its muddy banks. The River Voda was very old, and wide, hundreds of feet across. The ancient border between Michaeretz and Luciterra. It sparkled where the late afternoon sunlight scattered along its surface, but otherwise was a greenish brown, from the reflected trees and the silt that eddied in its depths.

The sight and sound of the water awakened thirst in all three of them. Sam and Dean slipped off of Angel’s back, and they knelt at the river to cup water in their hands, while the horse lowered his weary head. The water was bitingly cold. They drank it anyway, and drank some more, drank until their bellies ached.

Angel stumbled away from the bank, found a likely spot between two trees, and groaned as he laid down. Sam half-crawled toward him, and then curled himself between the horse’s legs, resting his head on the stallion’s belly. It was a stupid, stupid thing to do around any horse, but as children wandering the prairie on cold nights, Sam and Dean had tucked themselves against Impala, who had tolerated them. Why Sam would think to risk it on a horse as unpredictable as Angel, Dean didn’t know; whether his little brother wasn’t thinking straight from fatigue, or was going crazy, or was only thinking of the horse they’d just lost. Whatever the reason, Dean didn’t stop him, and neither did Angel. He merely looked down at Sam with tired eyes, and then lowered his own head to the ground in turn.

“Thank you, Angel,” said Sam, just audible over the river.

Dean stayed where he was, sitting on a large stone worn smooth by countless years of running water. At first, he thought of nothing. Then he saw a fish darting in the shallows near his feet, and thought idly of catching it. He didn’t move. It swam away downstream and he followed it with his gaze, staring east, wondering what it would be like to sail the river all the way to the ocean. What the ocean would even be like. Then he looked upstream, west, at the sinking sun, where the river curved back toward the mountains. Should they go east, to Rafaelia? West, to Lokiland? Did it matter?

The sky’s blue deepened with dusk. In the flashes of dying light against the water Dean saw the flash of Reaper magic. In the river’s flow he heard Tessa’s chanting—could it be that she had ever smiled at him, and then could look so murderous as she wielded her power against them?—and the steady, inexorable sound of the knights’ pursuit. Over and over again, as the stars faded in overhead and
small bats flit low over the water, snatching insects, Dean saw Impala running, and rearing. Saw the wild light in her eyes as she bucked Sam off. In the slight breeze he felt the softness of her nose, nudging his cheek, one last time. How she turned and leapt away, pulling the magic with her. Away from him and Sam. Away from Angel.

Angel, who hadn’t been caught in the Lasso’s snare.

Slowly, muscles stiff with days of riding and another hour of little movement, Dean turned to study the horse. Sam had barely moved, secure as he was between the stallion’s legs, his own gangly ones trailing out from where they were curled around him. He rocked with the steady up and down of Angel’s deep, sleepy breaths. The spell was specifically made to trap horses. How could Angel have been immune? He looked like a horse, ran like a horse, smelled like a horse. He was a horse, right?

Without being able to stop himself, he started tallying every small thing he’d ever brushed aside in the moment. Like how at first, he couldn’t see you sneaking up on him even though horses can see almost all the way around their bodies. Or how even though he was clearly hungry, it took him a long time before he’d eat his hay. Or how it took him months to approach other horses, or for them to approach him. He’d been named Angel for his strength and his stubbornness, his refusal to be broken. Some horses were just special like that—Impala was proof—but with Angel it was a little more than that. Horses were, at their core, prey animals who trusted the instincts of flight. Riders depended on their superior senses to react instantly in sticky situations, just as horses trusted their riders, even as they led them into bloody battles they were never meant to fight. Angel wasn’t like that, though, not quite. Sometimes, when the trainers were coming at him with new tricks up their sleeves, he would look a little too…calculating. And he didn’t always start the way other horses did, staying put while other horses hightailed it away from the loud noise or sudden movement. He didn’t keep fleeing when the Lasso came after them. It almost seemed as if he’d been trying to help Impala, stamping out the magic ropes.

And sometimes, when it was quiet, when it was just the two of them, Angel seemed to respond to Dean in ways that not even Impala did.

Could it be true? Could he be a warrior killed in the Border War, and returned to a new life in reward? Was Angel a Great Horse?

No, he couldn’t be. Myths and legends—there were no gods, no spirits. Just one birth, and one death, and the struggle to make it from one to the other. If there were Great Horses that means that gods blessed people, and if gods blessed people that means they blessed the royal family with magic, which means that Metratron truly does have right of rule, and that if he wants Sam and Dean dead, then the gods must, too.

But Angel…why would a god-blessed king want to break a god-blessed horse?
Relying on the moonlight, Dean crept off the rocks and stepped through roots to reach his brother, and the horse. Angel awoke at the soft sounds and lifted his head. “Whoa,” said Dean, not wanting to wake Sam. Angel shifted his shoulders and forelegs so that he could raise his neck comfortably but, Dean noticed, he did not move the rest of his body, leaving Sam to his slumber. Carefully he sat near the horse, and looked at him. Angel blinked placidly, looking back.

After a minute or two of silence, Dean spoke. “Did you try to help Impala today?”

Angel blinked again, and nodded once. It wasn’t the repeated up and down gesture of a horse, nor a toss of his head, but a small, simple nod.

Dean’s throat stuck. He swallowed a couple times. “Can you understand me?”

Another nod.

Dean was at war within himself. Horses understand people well enough but they can’t converse with them. He was going mad, mad with grief, with terror, with loss, shock, something. Or talking to a horse and reading into it what he wanted.

He held up both hands, palms out. “Touch my left hand,” he said.

Angel leaned forward and touched his nose to Dean’s left hand, ever so gently.

“Touch the right.”

The stallion huffed a breath, warm air against his palm, and then moved his nose to Dean’s right hand.

Dean lowered his hands, and did his best to ignore how they trembled. “Were you—were you always a horse?”

There was a considering pause, like he had to process how to answer, and then Angel shook his
large head in a very, very human manner.

A sudden sob rose up in Dean, so that he barely brought the back of his hand to his mouth in time to stifle it. Angel nudged his cheek in concern. The touch of his soft muzzle was like a brush against a crumbling wall: it all fell down. Dean dove forward, wrapping his arms around Angel’s neck, and wept.

It was so beautiful and strange and beyond his comprehension. The cynical part of him, the rational part of him, it was still clamoring to be heard, but for once in his life Dean drowned it out. For one small moment, he wanted to believe it. He wanted to believe that Angel was a warrior, a great spirit blessed by the gods, who had chosen them, chosen Dean. That despite Lucifer's Demons wiping out his village and killing his parents, and Metatron's Reapers attempting to kill them, that the gods were not all against the Winchesters. Not entirely. That this good, honest horse, this person, had refused Metatron and the royal trainers at every turn, but had allowed Dean to treat his wounds. Had accepted food from him, and the pick, and the brush. And in their direst need, had deigned to let Dean ride on his back for miles. For days. Dean wanted, needed to believe that he’d tried to help Impala. Most of all Dean needed to believe that when Angel looked at him with his big, blue eyes, and attentively turned his ears in Dean’s direction, that he was listening. That he cared. That maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t just Sam and Dean against the world anymore.

That in the moment Dean had lost all hope, that something good could happen.

Slowly his sobs petered out. Angel’s coat was damp where Dean had muffled his cries. Still Dean didn’t let go. He wanted to believe just a little longer. He wanted to feel safe.

Angel lowered his head to rest along Dean’s back. A comfort. A benediction.
Dean slept.
Dean woke with the moon in his eyes and horse scent in his nose. The sound of the Voda had become white noise, but opening his eyes made him hear it louder, anew. Sam was standing silhouetted against the river, a tall dark figure against the moonlight. Dean shifted, stiff, and eased himself away from Angel. Angel regarded him with a soft blink before heaving himself back onto his hooves. Dean wondered what he’d seen. Horses saw so much better in the dark.

At the noise Sam turned. He murmured a soft greeting to Angel before coming to sit by Dean, handing him a full waterskin. He gulped some down, still thirsty from their desperate flight. The brothers watched silently as Angel stepped to the river’s edge and drank, then started nosing about the underbrush for something edible. After a moment Sam’s presence hardened slightly, in that way he did when he was preparing himself to say something he thought Dean wouldn’t want to hear. But after tonight’s wretchedness he couldn’t muster the energy to brace himself. He stayed quiet, and let it come.

“The Lasso spell,” said Sam. “It’s for horses. It’s crafted, specifically, to catch horses.”

Dean grunted.

“Not even Impala could outrun the snares. But Angel...” Sam drifted off. They watched as the horse in question sniffed a likely leaf and snorted. Sam took a deep, considering breath, and hesitated. Here it is, Dean thought. “Do you think he really could be—”

“Maybe.”

Sam turned his head, eyes boring into the side of Dean’s face. “Okay,” he said. “What now?”

Dean sighed. “What we always do. Keep moving.”

But neither moved. The night was vast and velvet, the river a string connecting them to continent bigger and more unfamiliar to them than they could fathom, Demons on one side of it, and Reapers on the other, and yet—they sat. They sat under the weight of their new homelessness, and the even weightier what if of Angel. When Dean subtly cast his gaze to look at Sam, he saw the moonlight reflected in his eyes, shining in something like hope. But sleep had done its work and settled Dean’s own turmoil; the practical part of him again took precedence, and the idea of Angel being a Great
Horse was not so easy to swallow as it had been a few hours before. Besides which, he reasoned, even if he were—so what? It didn’t stop them from being attacked, didn’t save Impala. A cold comfort, nothing more.

Angel, not having found much to his liking, went browsing further into the forest. His black coat, without the moon to highlight it, camouflaged him in the darkness. Sam and Dean had a better chance of surviving with Angel, blessed or not, so they’d best follow before they lost him. Dean didn’t even allow himself a sigh as he stood, helping his brother gather their meager belongings. Despite the fact a decade had passed since they’d last wandered, it was easy to fall into the familiar rhythm of pick up and go. As they each knelt to refill their waterskins one last time, Angel leapt back to the water’s edge and nickered at them. Nearly slipping on the wet rocks, the brothers whipped around and looked for a potential foe. But Angel just stamped impatiently and tossed his head.

“What is it?” Sam asked, as if he were expecting a clear answer.

Whether the horse understood the question or not, he stepped up to Sam and delicately caught his sleeve in his teeth, tugging him forward a bit.

“Follow?” tried Sam.

Angel nodded once and turned, walking a couple trees ahead before turning to look back at them. Sam put his waterskin away, slung his bow across his back, and followed. Grimly, Dean did the same. One direction was as good as another, at this point: not much good at all.

At first Angel led them away from the river, back north into Michaeretz. For several minutes they descended deeper into the darkness, only feeble shafts of moonlight helping them to avoid roots and branches. Then the horse came to a halt. He lifted his head, turned it this way and that, flaring his nostrils and flicking his ears. Then, eyeing the brothers to make sure they still followed, he headed west.

Over the next hour they trailed behind the stallion, who would pause now and then to adjust their course, smelling the air. It wasn’t a behavior Dean had often seen in a horse, who usually would only follow their nose toward food. They had reached a clearing at one point, where the rising sun at last was making itself known, and Angel had set to the patch of grass with a vengeance. When he’d eaten his fill, however, it was clear that this hadn’t been his endgame after all. He sniffed around some more, sneezed at something he found, and set out in that direction at once. All Dean could smell was wet, green earth: a balance between the decaying plant life and new spring growth of the woods. There was no breeze to bring in scents from places near or far, no promontories to get a lay of the land, and they were more than far enough from the river that Dean was now only mostly sure which direction they were headed in. Still west, more or less, and though he’d thought they were as deep into the woods as they could possibly be, there were still more secrets it revealed to them.
Before midday the light reaching through the branches already darkened, the trees taller, wider, and mossier, more gnarled and twisted. They bent over this way and that, creating a denser cover overhead. With the last bits of sky almost gone the boys, well used to living their lives on the plains, felt a claustrophobic unease with the trail Angel was picking through the forest. Noises seemed louder; the flap of a bird’s wing or the skitter of claws on bark sounded near and ominous to Sam and Dean’s ears, though even a crow’s caw, sudden and close, was not enough to startle Angel from his task.

The shadows eventually grew so thick that Sam and Dean were reaching hands out to each other’s backs and shoulders, to reassure themselves and each other that they were still there, and steadying each other when they inevitably lost footing among the dirt and the worms. Thick cobwebs adorned the trees like lace, stretching from branch to trunk across their path. Angel snorted and plowed through them; Sam tried to cut through with his knife, but there were so many it was a lost cause. The three were draped in trails of white adorned with dead insects glittering like dark little pearls, their iridescence cradling what precious light penetrated the canopy.

Even then, neither Winchester suggested they stop. This was nothing like the forest edge they remembered from their childhood, and felt utterly different from their little haven by the river where they’d rested the night before. Then again, Angel had led them to the river in his wisdom. Perhaps this nigh impenetrable pocket of the world was their best defense. There was no telling what was already there, but it was certain indeed that Lady Tessa and the others were not.

At length—early afternoon, Dean wagered—Angel began to slow. Up to now he’d been walking in as steady a pace as possible in the undergrowth, but now his steps seemed considered, cautious. The brothers shared a look and nodded at each other, each drawing a knife in preparation for whatever they were about to stumble upon. A few minutes more and light shone faintly ahead of them, though not above. They followed it through the trees, dark columns rising tall around them, until suddenly they were at the edge of a clearing. They stopped.

The clearing was surprisingly large for such dense forest, though the canopy high above still curled inward, further enclosing the space. Maybe it was from being so long in the dark, but the sunlight that shone in it looked golden to Dean, honeyed, embracing the little cottage in the middle with warmth. Its thatched roof and stone walls were overrun with vines, thick as branches, but for all that it was inhabited: smoke puffed up from the single chimney, and the myriad and varied plants and flowers carpeting the open land was in an order of sorts. The garden was surrounded by a natural fence of gnarled hedges and, in case their thorns weren’t enough, a sign with a terse KEEP OUT! sprouted from the ground like a little sapling itself.

Signs of human life should have been a welcoming sight, despite the sign’s warning, but the longer they looked, the stranger it seemed. There were recognizable herbs and flowers aplenty in the garden, but others defied all expectation in color, size, and form, while pumpkins and squashes were growing out of season and toadstools, bright red and poisonous, were allowed to flourish. The
cottage’s windows had real panes of glass despite sitting so far away from civilization, some of them multicolored as only the nobles and temples of Mt. Heaven could afford, and arcane magical symbols were carved into wood and stone. And upon closer inspection the thorny, skeletal bushes that protected the property were dotted with the actual skeletons of small birds and rodents.

Apart from the chimney smoke and the dust motes that drifted lazily about, the whole image was so strange and still in its little honeyed bubble of light that it reminded Dean of the rare snow globes that were imported from Lokiland at a dear price. Eternal and untouchable.

This was not meant for them.

Angel walked forward into the clearing and against all instinct, Sam and Dean followed.

With space to work with, the brothers drew up on either side of the stallion, flanking him as they walked toward the hedge and its twisted little gate. With clear caution the horse lowered his head to sniff at the gate. No sooner had his sensitive nose lightly brushed it, than its thorny branches writhed into life. Even a horse’s swift instincts were no match for the preternatural speed of the plants, which shot out and wrapped around Angel’s neck. With startled cries Sam and Dean immediately went about hacking them with their knives, but as soon as they attacked, roots ripped through the soil at their feet and started winding up their legs. “Dean!” Sam shouted: his knife was making no headway. Dean reached for his sword, but a branch reached out from the hedge to snap around his wrists. Angel whinnied and pulled with all his strength, but in less than a minute they were all wrapped in plants, stiff and immobile from neck to foot. “S-Sam,” Dean tried. The word was practically squeezed out of him as the plants tightened more.

Only when they were completely at the mercy of the magic hedge did the cottage door slam open. A woman in a form-fitting green dress and fiery hair marched down the overgrown stone path. As she got closer it was obvious her clothes were of fine quality, and she even had her face painted like a noble. When she halted, separated from them only by the morass of thorns and roots, she smiled at them with blood red lips. It was not kind. “Now then,” she said, “who in the bloody hell are you?!”

“Wrrr…lssstt…” Sam gasped out.

“Noooo,” she said, falsely sweet, “you are not lost. You are here. Lost people do not just stumble upon here. So! Who are you, and what is it that you want?”

Angel nickered angrily at her, and she did a double-take. “Well, well,” she murmured. “Perhaps I should ask what are you, instead.”
“Not—” Dean struggled, “thrrrt.”

“I disagree,” she snapped, eyes flashing. “Only someone with power can come past my warding which makes you very much a threat. Must have been you,” she added, looking to Sam. “What did you do to the horse? He can’t be a familiar. What is he?”

“Grrt Hrsss.”

“Great Horse?” the woman scoffed. “No such thing.”

“Of course not,” came a new voice. “He’s not a dead warrior. He’s a prince.”

There was a man standing in the cottage doorway dressed, if not quite nobly, then as well as the upper merchant class in dark, expensive cloth. He had short brown hair and beard, and with hands deep in his pockets, he sauntered down the path to join them. “And very much alive,” he added. “Hello, Castiel.”

There was a singular, crystal moment in which the three travelers were as still as their surroundings.

Then Angel sighed a great sigh, and seemed to grow smaller and lighter at once, as if a great weight had been lifted from him. Exhausted, his head hung low.

“Ah,” said the woman. “I see.”

Not taking her eyes off Angel, she gave a small wave of her hand, and the hedges drew away. Sam and Dean took deep breaths, shaking out their limbs and brushing at the thin pricks of blood the thorns left behind. But Angel didn’t react. The stallion looked so sad and sorry, so different from his usual pride and strength, that Dean felt himself puff up with anger. But the woman had very clearly just done magic, which made her a Reaper, or more likely, a Demon. He had never heard of a royal family member handing out spells to anyone else. How in the world were they going to protect themselves? He picked his knife up off the ground, and didn’t sheathe it. Sam and Dean eyed each other over Angel’s back. How were they going to play this?

“What did you do to him?” Dean asked.
“Why, nothing,” the man said, matter of fact.

“Bullshit. Look at him!”

“I said his name,” the man answered. “Names carry a very particular kind of power. And it’s been a long time since you’ve heard yours, hasn’t it, Your Highness?”

Angel blew a tired little sigh.

“His name is Angel,” said Dean.

The woman crossed her arms and tapped her chin thoughtfully, still looking at the black stallion. The man simply raised an eyebrow. “And if he answers to it, that will always be a part of him. But his name is Castiel, son of Michael, rightful king of Michaeretz.”

For almost four full days they’d been on the run, little food, little sleep; they’d been beaten by assassins, had the shit kicked out of them for riding hours on end, they’d lost the third member of their little family, stumbled through woods and webs and the gods know what else; these people attacked them with magic plants and now their theory about Angel was making Dean look almost well adjusted. “You guys are fucking crazy.”

The man made a big show of ignoring Dean and turning to Angel. “Got some friends, did you, princeling? I understand you were desperate but they’re not very bright. It’s a good thing they’re pretty.”

At this Angel raised his head and glared balefully.

“Hit a nerve, did we?”

“Enough, Fergus,” said the woman. Her northern brogue drew out the r in his name. Ferrrgus. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t bow, Your Highness,” she continued, presumably to the horse. “I may not be as old as your father was, but I was certainly around long before this continent was split into kingdoms, when the Coilluaíne was more than this pitiful strip of land and the forest stretched halfway across the prairie.” She heaved a dramatic sigh.
Shit, Dean seriously did not have the patience for this. They had to extract themselves before the crazy people who’d gotten their hands on magic used their bones for parts. “Lady,” Dean said, “this is a horse. His name is Angel. We’re just travelers who got lost in the woods. Sorry to bother you.” He jerked his head at Sam to indicate they should start walking. Even as he pretended to be nonchalant about the whole thing he was alert for the sign of any movement from the plants or the trees, anything that would halt them like the hedges did before. They were mostly back to the woods when Dean peeked over his shoulder to make sure they weren’t being followed when he realized that Angel hadn’t moved. He grabbed Sam’s arm to stop him and turned around. “Angel!” he called.

In broad daylight, when Dean couldn’t ascribe it to grief or a dream, Angel slowly and deliberately shook his head.

“Dean,” Sam breathed, eyes wide.

Dean felt like he’d been struck. “Maybe he’s theirs,” Dean said. “Maybe he belongs to Demons and that’s why Metatron wanted to break him…”

Sam gave him a very hard look. “Angel isn’t evil,” he said, and marched back toward the hedges, and the horse.

“Sam!” Dean hissed, but the stubborn ass shrugged him off and was on his way. “Gods damn it.” With no choice, he set off after him.

His stupid little brother walked right past Angel and stood a hair’s breadth away from the dangerous gate. “My name’s Sam.”

The man looked unimpressed but the woman smiled, and if Dean didn’t know better, was almost delighted looking a foot up into Sam’s face. “A pleasure to meet you, Sam,” she said graciously. “You may call me Rowena.”

“Yeah, charmed,” he answered. “Are you a Demon?”

“Sam!” Dean grabbed his arm and tried to pull in front of him to block any incoming attack, but Sam just elbowed him back.
Rowena laughed. “Goodness me, no. I’m a witch.”

“That’s a folktale,” said Sam.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, Charles did his work well.”

“You believe in Great Horses but don’t believe in witches?” Fergus snorted. He made an exaggerated show of ‘whispering’ to Angel. “Is he touched?”

Dean had no idea where Sam thought this conversation was going, but he sure understood that. “Hey,” he snarled, “back off, Fergus.”

Despite being a few inches shorter than Dean, the man nevertheless managed to look down his nose at him. “That’s Lord Crowley to you, boy.”

In a single rush Dean put all the pieces together. Lord Crowley of course, of course! That’s why people with northern Michaeretzer accents are in a southern, Demon-infested forest, why two non-royal strangers had magic—Crowley, the great traitor, who had sold Prince Castiel out to Lucifer in the very hour of his parents’ deaths, and run off like a coward. Crowley had very famously been the prince’s personal tutor, and probably had had access to all the royal family’s magic spells, in a way that not even the Reapers did. And if he’d betrayed the prince, he’d probably been a spy to the enemy all along, caused the death of the king. Maybe even the razing of their old village. Their parents’ fiery deaths. The woman must be an accomplice. “Sam, let’s go.”

“Not yet,” his brother said, looking far too fucking thoughtful at the revelation.

“Sam!” When he showed no signs of moving Dean muttered, “Fuck this,” and brought his knife up to bring down into Crowley’s neck. Before his hand got fully over the gate, a single thorny branch shot up and wrapped around his wrist.

Crowley looked unaffected, the bastard. “Whatever was that for?”

Dean put all of his strength behind his arm, muscles straining, but it barely moved. “Selling out the prince? Betraying the kingdom? Probably causing half the massacres of the Border War?” he gritted out. “Take your damn pick.”
A dry, curled leaf from the branch broke free and drifted onto Crowley’s shoulder. The traitor sighed and brushed it away. “Yes, that makes so much sense! Which is why I’m here, in this terrible little cottage in the middle of nowhere, with my mother, instead of reaping the benefits of such a dastardly betrayal.”

Rowena sniffed. “You can leave anytime, Fergus.”

“Wait,” said Sam, “you’re his mother?”

She turned a dazzling smile back on Sam but Dean interrupted before she could speak. “Bigger problems, Sam!”

“But he’s right,” Sam said. “Why would he be hiding here?”

“Because he’s a fugitive.”

“But if he succeeded in delivering the prince to Lucifer, why isn’t he with him?”

“Well,” said Crowley, holding up a hand and pushing out, which made the plant holding Dean’s arm push the knife down and away, “why don’t you take a moment to actually think and ask who benefited from the disappearance of the princeling?”

“Lucifer,” said Dean immediately.

“No,” said Sam, slowly. “He almost died with King Michael, and no one actually won the Border War.” He looked at Rowena and Crowley in turn, and then over at Angel, whose eyes and ears were completely centered on their conversation. “Metatron.”

Angel nodded.

Crowley clapped sarcastically. “It seems they have half a brain between them, after all.”
Dean pulled his arm back toward himself, and as soon as he stopped pushing toward the gate, the hedge let him go. He sheathed his knife and this time grabbed Sam with both hands.

“Dean—what—?”

“Shut it, Sammy,” he said, dragging his enormous little brother most of the way back to the forest. Then he swung him around so they were facing each other. “You’re not actually buying what they’re selling here, are you?” he hissed.

“I don’t know, Dean,” Sam answered. “But look at what we do know. We know that whether or not Metatron is a good king, he’s a bad person. He abused animals and he tried to kill us when we’ve done nothing wrong. And who was the only witness to the prince’s supposed kidnapping?”

Dean clenched his jaw and didn’t answer. But he didn’t need to.

“Metatron is the one who said that Crowley betrayed the royal family. And Angel… I don’t know if he’s more than a horse, but you can’t really believe he’s associated with Demons, do you?”

They both looked over at Angel, who was paying no attention to Crowley and Rowena who were whispering beyond the gate. He stood, somewhat forlorn, with his ears trained in their direction. When he saw them looking, he cautiously walked toward them until his bulk stood as a shadow at their shoulders. Dean watched but did not soften, even as the stallion blinked his blue eyes at him, big and expressive in a way that only horses could. When still Dean didn’t waver, Angel reached out with his nose and brushed the soft skin against Dean’s cheek, and then curled his head past his shoulder. Dean shuddered at the delicate touch and by instinct reached a hand up to stroke the horse’s neck. Angel was steel and sweetness as all horses were, his lovely soft coat and the corded muscle underneath. With his fingertips he traced the scars left by Gadreel’s whip, and unbidden remembered how soaked he’d been with blood, that first night that Angel let Dean care for him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The smell of horses had been home to him ever, and it broke his resolve in a way that words never could.

He brought up his other arm to fully embrace Angel’s neck. He didn’t know what the horse really was, nor what was true, but he and Sam could use rest, and food, and allies, and after leaving Impala behind he could hardly bear even the thought of leaving Angel as well. “Fine,” he whispered to him. “You win.”

Angel let him hold the embrace a moment longer before pulling away. He then circled the brothers and nosed them both in the back, urging them toward the cottage. Sam strode back and, slightly sulky, Dean followed.
As they approached Rowena and Crowley broke off their argument. Rowena clasped her hands and smiled at them. “Yes?”

“We’re willing to hear you out,” said Sam. “Especially about Angel.”

“Wonderful!” she said. “And?”

Sam nudged Dean. He crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “No more stabbing. I guess.”

Crowley grunted and turned on his heel, heading back up the winding path into the cottage. Rowena stepped back and made a sweeping gesture, which caused the hedge gate to swing open. “In that case, won’t you come inside and have a cup of tea?”

Sam stepped in and followed her up the walk. Angel gave Dean another nudge in the shoulder. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, and crossed the threshold.

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After a bit of kerfuffle when Rowena refused to let a horse into her house, Sam and Dean found themselves sitting at a small wooden table while a miffed Crowley poured them tea and Rowena fussed with a round window. The tea set was probably porcelain—Dean had never actually drunk out of porcelain before—a dark purple fading to lavender and edged with gold. The cups looked particularly dainty in the Winchesters’ large, calloused hands; Sam picked his up delicately and dwarfed it in his palms. Sam looked up at Crowley plaintively. "Do you have any bigger cups?"

Dean kicked him under the table, causing Sam's tea to slosh onto his fingers. If that wasn't enough to cow him, Crowley gave him a look so scathing Dean could almost imagine the steam was curling from his ears instead.

"There we go!" said Rowena, swinging open the large, round window. "Don't give me that look, there were several spells I had to modify in order to let you in. You're like a walking hex bag, you realize."

Angel stuck his large head and neck through the window, his nose only about a foot away from
Dean's shoulder. Rowena placed a rickety stool in front of the stallion and then - propping up the handle with a single finger - she lifted a bucket of water and set it on the seat. The horse gave the water a big sniff, eyeing the Witch all the while, before plunging his nose in and drinking his fill. Dean looked down at his own tea cup. The white on the inside of the porcelain made it easy to see the murkiness of the tea, the little bits of leaf and herb and who knew what else. It smelled...like tea. He drank water, or beer. Lady Tasha sometimes made tea, but usually for the knights. He supposed it didn't smell too dissimilar from that. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sam take a sip, think a little, then sip some more. When he didn't immediately keel over, Dean took a sip as well. It was...weird flavored water. It was hot, at least, and a bone-deep chill that had lived with him the past few days, the night and the dew and the forest shadow, melted away.

Crowley sat down at the table next to Dean and across from Sam, and poured milk into his own purple teacup. "Well then, boys," he said. "Sam and...?"

"That's my brother, Dean," Sam said, when no other answer was forthcoming.

Dean gave him a jovial fake smile, which Crowley returned with a cool upturning of the lips. "Dean. A pleasure. Now your accents tell me you're not too far from home, but you've got a bit of Mt. Heaven in your vowels. So what were a couple of bumpkins like you doing in the cultural capital of Chamara long enough to acquire a bit of class?"

Dean's knee-jerk response was to protest the name-calling, but the alternative was to argue that he was more aligned with the nobles and yeah, no. So he settled for taking an obnoxious, bumpkin-like slurp from his tiny-ass teacup.

"We're grooms in the royal stables," said Sam.

"Were," Dean corrected. "We were grooms in the royal stables."

"The plot thickens," commented Crowley. "But it does explain how you ran into Castiel."

They all looked over at Angel, who'd finished drinking from his bucket. He blinked at them placidly.

"Now don't start the storytelling before I'm ready," Rowena called from the other side of the room, where she was bustling about, taking things from cupboards. One had jars of what looked distinctly like small, dead animals suspended in different colored liquids. Gross. "Stories must be told well, to be worth the telling." There was a large open oven in which a fire crackled merrily beneath a cast
iron pan with small breads. She poked one with her finger. "The three of you had good timing. A minute later and the scones would have been burned. A wee bit earlier and I wouldn't have them in the oven at all. Some would say," she continued, plucking the *scones* from the pan and putting them in a basket, "that it's coincidence. Others would call it fate." She put the basket on a tray that also had two jars and some knives, and brought it over to the table. She smoothed her dress and sat elegantly in the last chair, as plain as it was.

"And what would you call it?" asked Dean. The scones smelled amazing, but who the hell knew what they were. He ignored his rumbling stomach for the moment.

She gave him a sly smile. “Lucky.”

“Abnormally lucky,” added Crowley, who had already sliced his scone in half and was spreading a thick red jam on top of it.

“Perhaps,” said Rowena. She picked up another knife to spread her scone with a thick clotted cream. When the two were done, instead of handing the knives to each other, they placed them back in their respective jars, and reached for the other one, with a pointed aloofness. Sam and Dean watched avidly as Rowena added jam on top of her cream, and Crowley cream on top of his jam. When they both took a bite of their doctored up scone, and the brothers watched their eyes close and mouths lift in perfect delight, Sam and Dean each grabbed their own scone, sliced them in half, and grabbed the knife from the jar closest to them.

“No!” cried both Rowena and Crowley, aghast. Then they glared at each other.

“Cream. First,” hissed Rowena, without looking away.

“Jam first, I think you’ll find,” retorted Crowley.

Dean rolled his eyes and used the jam first, since that was the knife he was holding. “What’s the difference between ‘abnormally’ lucky, and fate?” After slapping a healthy dollop on, he switched knives with Sam, and dug into the clotted cream.

Rowena sniffed disdainfully at his scone, but deigned to answer. “Fate implies that everything that will be is written as permanently as everything that has been. This negates free will. Are you believers in fate?” she asked, taking another bite.
“Hell no,” said Dean.

“Free will,” Sam agreed, nodding.

Having finished their preparations, they each took a cautious bite of their scone. Once the fullness of the flavor hit their tongues, the sweetness of the bread, the heartiness of the cream, the sharp raspberry jam cutting through it all, they paused and looked at each other in surprise. Then they groaned, sinking into their chairs, their days of deprivation making their hunger roar into life. They both stuffed the rest of the treat into their mouths and picked up their respective halves while they were still chewing, scrabbling for the jam and cream, crumbs clinging to the corners of their mouths.

Rowena sat still, paused mid-chew, and Crowley was frozen with his scone nearly at his lip, jaw hanging open.

Angel nickered.

That snapped the two back into motion. Crowley set down his scone and eyed the stallion, who was stretching his neck further into the house, shoulders bumping against the windowsill. “No, you may not have cream tea. I’ll find you a little treat later, Highness.”

Angel snorted, a fierce look in his eye.

“No,” said Crowley, his upper class airs deflating into something almost genuine. “You’re not, are you?”

Dean looked back and forth between Crowley and Angel. “What, you can understand him?” He crammed the second half of his scone into his mouth all at once.

Crowley raised his eyebrows at the spectacle. “Ah—” He cleared his throat. “Somewhat.”

“Whazzat mnn?” Dean asked through his pastry. He wiped some jam and cream off his lip and sucked it from his thumb, letting another little groan escape. They say hunger is the best spice, but this seriously might be the best shit he’s ever eaten.
“It...means,” began Crowley, dark eyes growing wider. He was a lord, of course, so he’d probably never been really hungry in his life. He cleared his throat again and drank some tea. “He’s a horse, and there’s no getting around that, but he’s also a man who was well on his way to becoming a mage while under my tutelage. With my own sensitivities to nature, he can make himself understood.”

“Yurr mage?” Sam asked through his own mouthful.

“Yes,” said Crowley primly.

“No, he’s a Witch,” said Rowena, “like me.”

Crowley huffed a breath and looked to the heavens, like this was a well worn argument. “I was born with magic and raised as a Witch, if you can call my mother’s parenting style raising.”

“You say the kindest things, Fergus!”

“But as I studied at the royal university, I have learned their version of the craft and am also a mage.”

Dean swallowed, halfway into dressing his second scone. “That makes no sense. Only royals are born with magic.”

“Hmph. The two of you know nothing.”

At the brothers’ twin glares Rowena took back the reins of the conversation. “The point is, there are more forces in nature than most people are attuned to. Powerful forces, that have wills, but nevertheless don’t truly take away ours. Though they may try,” she added. Ominously, Dean felt, as if she’d had some personal experience.

“Like gods?” Sam perked up, glancing significantly at Angel.

“I have been alive for a very, very long time, but I have never seen evidence of godhood. That said,” she shrugged, a red curl tumbling forward off her shoulder, “there are indeed forces. And some witches—and mages—live long enough, and grow powerful enough, that the difference may simply be...semantic.”
Semantic, Dean mouthed to himself, making a note to ask Sam later if he’d come across it before.

But Sam latched onto another part of the sentence. “How old are you then?”

“Why, Sam!” she exclaimed. “Don’t you know it’s impolite to ask a lady her age?” She pressed a hand to her heart, but ruined the outraged image by subtly dragging a painted fingernail across her breast, drawing attention to her cleavage.

Sam blushed down to his neck and up into the roots of his hair, and no, nope. Dean pointed the jam knife in her direction; a red raspberry glob flung off its tip to land between them, barely missing Rowena’s teacup. “You seemed pretty sure there was no such thing as Great Horses. How’s that any different?”

“Oh, please,” she dismissed. If the sly look she was giving him was anything to go by, she was perfectly aware of his disapproval. “Stories of the gods may make them seem human, but by definition there’s something divine and ineffable about them we don’t quite understand. Soldiers reincarnated as horses, on the other hand? Humans have souls, and horses have souls, but they’re different. To anyone with strong enough magic, a human soul in a horse body would certainly draw attention. As for the prince…”

They all turned to Angel, who seemed to stand a little straighter under their scrutiny. Rowena and Crowley tilted their heads this way, and that, clearly looking at something neither Sam nor Dean could see.

“What a mess,” muttered Crowley.

“Definitely not a horse, but no longer quite human anymore either,” Rowena said at last.

At this pronouncement Angel looked at Dean, somehow seeming small again. Dean reached out and stroked his cheekbone, and scritched behind the bolt of his jaw. The horse leaned into the contact.

“What happened?” Sam asked, quiet.

Crowley sighed and picked up his tea, but didn’t drink. He tapped his finger on its golden edge,
looking still at Angel, but also far away. “To the rest of the kingdom, I was Castiel’s tutor for the mundane sciences. But to those in the king’s circle, it was known that I also taught him the arcane sciences. The royals don’t like people to know that commoners are not only born with magic, but can become just as proficient as they in the craft.”

“We’re hardly commoners,” said Rowena.

He whipped his head around to glare at her. “You gave birth to me in the dirt,” he snarled. “We’re as common as they come!”

“What do you mean, commoners can be born with magic?” asked Sam, before Rowena could muster past her indignation to respond. “If that were true, magic would be everywhere, but it’s not.”

Crowley pointedly gave his mother the cold shoulder and waved his hand back and forth. “Mind over matter, etc., etc. At any rate, no one liked that I rose to the highest ranks at university, but one of the king’s good qualities was that he didn’t have to like something to see its worth. And so he entrusted his one and only son, from all his centuries of living, to me. And I’ll admit,” he said, nodding to Angel, who had an eye and ear flicked in his direction, but was still leaning into Dean’s pets, “that at first I cared little for the prince, and instead enjoyed the perks of my position in the royal household. But against all expectations, he was a good student with a fine mind. And more than that, it was clear to me that he would be powerful. Maybe even more powerful than his father.

“And worse, in some people’s eyes, a better king.”

“Why’s that worse?” said Sam, biting into another scone.

“Because His Majesty King Michael was, aside from his father Charles, his aunt Amara, and quite possibly his brother Lucifer, the most powerful mage this world has ever known. Thus his power was such he could wield the spells that would make him effectively immortal—barring a challenge which was, of course, his end.” Crowley gave an eloquent shrug, and finished his tea. “But the prevailing thought in court was that a few dozen centuries down the line, he would follow in his father’s footsteps and retire from public life, leaving his beloved son the throne, who would not only be strong enough to hold his seat in magic, but in will.” He tipped his teacup back and forth, as if studying the dregs, before setting it back in its saucer with a delicate clink.

Dean ran his fingers along Angel’s face, trying to memorize the softness of his dark coat. Tracing a small scar on the horse’s neck, he said, “And then Metatron.”
“Yes,” said Crowley. “Metatron.” He crossed his arms, bunching the expensive fabric of his jacket. “I never liked the bastard, but then again I never liked most of the court. I don’t know how much of a hand he had in the king and queen’s deaths, if any. Lucifer is dastardly enough to have done it all his own.”

“Oh yes,” murmured Rowena, more into her tea than anything.

“It’s just as likely that when the news reached the castle that the king was dead, and Castiel ran distraught to our ingredients garden, apparently somewhere he felt…safe…” Angel hung his head, closing his eyes in a slow blink. After a moment’s consideration, Crowley continued, “Metatron took his chance. He came at the prince armed with the makings of enough Hellfire to incinerate a mage even of Castiel’s potential power.”

A cup clattered back into its saucer, startling Dean into looking at Rowena. “You were there!” she said. “You told me you were framed after the fact but you were there.”

“It was the garden outside my study! Of course I was there!” he yelled, slamming his fist on the table. “I wasn’t on the battlefield because I was Castiel’s last line of defense!”

Mother and son stared at each other, but without the petty irritation of all their earlier squabbles. There was something dark and complicated between them, that spoke of many long years of fraught family dynamics—but family nonetheless. Rowena swallowed and took a breath. “The smart thing would have been to back the winner.”

“Mother,” said Crowley, “whether or not he’s won yet, I backed the right horse.” He gestured sardonically to Angel and broke their gaze. “And I’ll say no more on that subject.”

“Well!” she huffed, her supercilious veneer back in place. “It’s not like we have a choice on whom to back now, is there?”

The little cottage was silent for a moment. Outside, a crow cawed. The slant of the light filtering through the multicolored windows stretched farther along the floor.

“Hellfire?” Dean asked. When did his voice get so small?

“Hellfire,” Crowley confirmed. “It wasn’t a bad idea on his part. The warding in my study, where
Castiel would also practice his magic, would have been strong enough to contain the worst of it. And the spell is the signature of Lucifer’s Demons. Few people would question it.”

“How do you stop Hellfire?” asked Sam.

“You don’t,” was the answer. “Best is to stop the caster before the spell is done. Metatron was so intent on getting to Castiel as he wept among the flowers I was able to blast the ingredients right out of his hands. And I would have been able to take care of it from there, if His Highness, in all his wisdom, hadn’t felt the need to interfere.”

Angel turned his head and blew at him, close enough that Crowley’s hair lifted a bit from his forehead.

“Metatron’s even older than me,” Rowena said. “It’s unlikely you would have won without help.”

“He was blinded by his desires,” Crowley contradicted, “and enraged that I’d ruined his plans. When he couldn’t get past our shields, even Castiel’s, distraught though he was, Metatron started picking up every pouch and vial on the shelves and tossing them at us. But they were mine, you see,” he said. “So while much of it was magery, there were also plenty items more in line with witchcraft. And he got lucky. He threw several at once, which burst at the prince’s feet. The edge of the explosion knocked me out, but Castiel took the brunt of it. And when I awoke…” He sighed. “The prince was gone, the castle in disarray, Metatron was already setting himself in charge and soon every Reaper left alive was after my head. And since I prefer it to be attached to my neck, I was forced into hiding.”

“You ran to me, you mean,” said Rowena. She made a show of turning to address Sam and Dean. “I’m the only Witch powerful enough to make any sort of defense against such a force.”

Crowley didn’t agree, but then he didn’t disagree either. He poured himself another cup of tea, and topped it off with more milk. “So that was the last I saw of the prince,” he said. “What’s your story?” He sipped, made a face, and then blew on his drink. A curl of new steam spiraled up from the ripples.

“Several months ago a group of horse chasers brought in this gorgeous, temperamental black stallion,” Sam said. “And the grooms—and Dean,” he corrected himself, “named him Angel.”

When Rowena and Crowley turned their interested gazes onto him, Dean kept his eyes trained on the
horse. While Sam told their story, even his regard began to carry too much weight, so Dean turned back to his tea, and he ate. When his brother reached the point about the Lasso spell, he felt the latest scone turn to dust in his mouth. He ached for Impala. It wasn’t right that he was warm and fed and safe, and she was likely suffering the cold and cruel treatment of her captors.

“But the Lasso passed right through him,” Sam was saying.

Rowena nodded. “He reads too human for it to have worked.”

Sam shook his head and fiddled with his plate. “So Angel really is Prince Castiel, huh?”

Angel aimed a soft nicker at Sam, as if in agreement.

Dean felt the weight of the statement heavy on his shoulders, then abruptly shoved away from the table, toppling the jar of cream. He stomped out the front door of the cottage and stepped off the path into the garden, the opposite side from Angel where the chimney was chugging away. He stood amid the flowering trees and tall herbs swaying in the afternoon light, a pumpkin two feet tall at his knee.

It just—it didn’t feel right. It was one thing to care for and coddle a horse, to groom him and feed him, to comfort him in his pain, and ride him for miles across the prairie, and whisper secrets to him in the dead of night. It was quite another to think of a person this way. To think of him as family and weep on his shoulder. It reeked of betrayal, but also something else. Something close to fear. How could Angel—Castiel—a *prince*—how could he know so much of Dean, and Dean know so little in return?

When Angel turned around the back corner of the cottage, it was little surprise. The horse seemed to be stepping cautiously through thorny rose bushes and giant toadstools, but almost to like he didn’t know how Dean would react. Like the horse was afraid that Dean would be the one to spook.

But he didn’t spook. He was frozen with indecision. He could hardly bear staying, but where could he run? Sam was here, and two Witches, in an enchanted cottage, and Michaeretz’s fiercest warriors waiting for them to emerge from the forest, and Lucifer’s cursed lands south of them, their parents’ deaths behind, and a large black stallion directly ahead. The horse stopped just out of Dean’s reach. His big, blue eyes were wet, and as Dean watched, tears bubbled over to spill down his long face. Horses really only cried when their eyes were irritated, but this was not that. Dean saw the tears and he finally knew. He just knew.
“C-Castiel?” he said softly.

The horse—the man let out a wretched sigh and closed the distance between them, once again tucking his head over Dean’s shoulder. Automatically he embraced him, and it felt the same, but oh, so different. Castiel trembled and took long, wet breaths. Dean soothed him, running a hand along his neck, like when he used to rub Sam’s back after another nightmare.

When at length the man…the horse pulled away, Dean looked at him and tried to see a prince. But he just saw Angel. Impala was her own person, Dean reasoned. Is it really so strange that he could be, too? Even by another name? He reached with his hands and brushed at the tear tracks on either side of Castiel’s face. “Do you want me to stay? Do you want me and Sam to stay with you?”

The stallion nodded, so emphatically Dean had to lean away.

“Whoa, okay, Cas. Okay, buddy,” he said. “We’ll stay.” He trailed his fingers down between his nostrils, the softest part of a horse’s nose. “We’ll stay.”
Sam watched Dean flee the cottage, and how Angel, rolling his eyes in equine panic, whinnied and backed up as quickly as he could, clearly aiming to go after his brother. He wasn’t always sure what upset Dean so much, since he still often kept things from Sam in typical big brother fashion, but he figured it was maybe feeling a little like he’d just lost another horse. But Sam didn’t see it that way. Having their suspicions confirmed, even in a way they didn’t expect, made something settle inside down to his bones. For once, he felt he was exactly where he needed to be.

When Angel, the prince that is, was completely gone from the view of the large window, Crowley stood from the table and looked out after him, right arm resting on the round wooden sill. After observing for a moment, he abruptly turned and left through the back door of the cottage, the soft closing of the door behind him at odds with the tense line of his shoulders. The prickles of unease he’d first felt when arriving at the clearing rose up in him again, and he was halfway out of his seat after the mage before Rowena patted his hand.

“My son has always been softer than he needs to be,” she lamented. “He is worried for his charge. Against all reason.” She sighed and looked at the table, its crockery askew and crumbs and jam everywhere. “Be a dear and help me clean up, won’t you?”

She set the cream jar upright and picked up the tray with the empty scone basket, bringing it to a bench in the corner opposite the fireplace. Sam stood and set the purple porcelain pieces as neatly as he could on the tea tray and carefully carried it over to her. When he set it down she grabbed a pouch hanging against the wall, opened it, dipped a thumb and forefinger inside, and pulled out a pinch of blue powder. With a flick of her wrist she tossed it over the dirty dishes which sprung into the air as soon as the powder touched them and stayed there, sparkling. Humming to herself, she opened the cupboard and plucked the pieces from the air one by one and put them away. Fascinated, Sam grasped his own little teacup. Its delicate weight fell into his hand as soon as he touched it.

Rowena took it from him and placed it with the rest of the tea set, and closed the cupboard. Then she took another, smaller pinch of the powder before cinching the pouch back tight. This she sent flying over the table which, as soon as it landed, caused it to gleam as if it’d just had a good polishing.

“That’s amazing,” said Sam. “I never knew magic could be so…”

“Ordinary?” Rowena supplied. “Non-bellicose?”
“Yeah.”

“Magic is much more than most on the continent know. Come,” she said, beckoning him with a tilt of her head. “You have many more questions. I can tell you’re not quite satisfied.”

To his horror Sam felt himself blushing again, but he tried to ignore it. Teasing aside, her offer seemed genuine enough, so he followed her to the back door. To his surprise, however, it didn’t lead out the other side of the cottage at all, but into another room. Two of the walls were mostly windows, the stained glass in intricate vine patterns amid a clear background, speckling the floor and furniture with green. The solid wall near what Sam assumed was the real back door was covered in mundane gardening tools, and some not so mundane. In the corner a steep wooden staircase led to an unexpected second floor. The cottage was clearly much bigger than it had looked on the outside, though still much smaller than, say, the Roadhouse Tavern. Nevertheless Sam was beginning to see how little he truly understood of the world.

Rowena led him to a pair of wicker chairs sat up against the glass windows. They were unlike any other kind of wicker, though, the woven plants looking healthy and even sprouting leaves here and there. The cushions on them were green with embroidered white and gold flowers. When she relaxed back into one of them, she looked at once at home and also like a queen, her red hair radiant as a crown amidst all the greenery.

Sam folded his frame into the other chair, and was somewhat impressed when it barely creaked.

Rowena propped her elbow onto the arm of her chair and rested her chin on her knuckles. “So,” she said.

“So…” Sam echoed, hardly knowing where to begin. At last he settled on, “When you look at Angel—at, at Castiel, what do you see?”

“Hmm.” Her painted eyelids slid half-mast as she considered her answer. “Magic carries signatures, both from the type of magic and the caster. His aura is a pulsing mess of witchcraft, magery, Crowley, and Metatron himself. Shapeshifting is hard enough to perform on purpose, and even more difficult to resolve. The fact that whatever spells and ingredients were thrown at him didn’t result in some hideous, deformed beast is impressive enough. I am forced to conclude,” she said, haughty in her reluctance, “that my son’s estimate of the princeling’s power is accurate. Someone with inherent magic will instinctively protect his- or herself even without spellwork, and Castiel’s power was able to twist it into something less harmful. Though he was hardly conscious of it, I’d wager.” She shrugged. “He’s altered, and he’s bound, that much is plain to see.”
“And…when you look at me, what do you see?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Why, magic, of course.”

Sam shivered and closed his eyes, the meal growing heavy in his belly. “It’s true, then. He infected me.”

“Whatever are you on about?” Rowena asked. “I see no one’s magic but your own.”

He looked back up at her. “What?”

“You have a deep well of untapped potential, Sam. Far too much, in fact, to have had no sign of it, which is probably why you asked. You’d make a fine Witch with the correct training.” She gracefully spread her hands. “What did you think I meant?”

He stared hard at her, studied her relaxed posture and the curious tilt of her head. He could find no sign of subterfuge. “A Demon,” he said at last. “A Berserker Demon.”


Sam nodded. He tried to swallow around the lump in his throat. For years they’d played off Sam’s nightmares as a result of the war, just another boy wounded in the mind but what he’d experienced. They’d hid their worries, Dean because he was afraid they’d take Sam away, and Sam, Sam because he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. He’d never told Dean all of it, either. Because he tried to protect his brother, too.

But this might be the closest he’d ever come to having a real answer. Even if it was bad, wouldn’t it be good to finally know for certain?

“What did they look like?” Rowena asked with a surprising delicacy.

“He was pale-skinned,” he said quietly. “Short, dark hair. Middle-aged, maybe. Yellow eyes. And his smile…”
“Sounds like Azazel,” she said. “He often targeted children. It may please you to know that he died in battle, early on in the war.”

“I know,” he said. “My parents killed him.”

At this her eyes widened. “Were they Witches?” He shook his head. “Then however did they manage it?”

“I’m not sure,” Sam answered. “Dean said they just didn’t stop fighting, right to the end.”

They sat a moment in respectful silence. A small breeze went through the garden outside, causing the shadows dappling the room to bend and right themselves.

“You know,” Rowena said, “it’s very likely that one or both of them had inherent magic, given your own sensitivity. It would have helped them last a little longer against magical attack.”

“How can you be so sure?” Sam asked, giving voice to his fears in a rush now that the floodgate had opened. “He did something to me, I know he did. I didn’t imagine it and Dean agrees he put a spell on me. And yeah it was the worst night of my life, but I have these dreams…and they’re different from when I dream about my parents. They’re these horrible, vivid nightmares, and half the time I’m just watching but other times it’s like…I’m a part of them.” He stared at his hands, their calloused palms, and tried to forget what it felt like to crush a skull between them.

“Okay,” she said. “Tell me what you remember.”

“He picked me up, and I kicked him. But he just laughed and then he got out this powder, a yellow powder, and blew it in my face. It reeked of rotten eggs. And then I couldn’t move.” He looked at Rowena, eyes watering, begging her to understand. “He started choking Dean and I would do anything for my brother, anything, but I couldn’t move.” He took a deep breath and tried not to let the tears fall. “But I could see. I’ve never told anyone that, not even Dean. I could see it all. My parents tried to save him, too, but couldn’t get past some sort of magical barrier. So our horse Impala kicked it down. She saved us.” Sam took a moment to send a short little prayer to the gods for her safety. “Then she trampled the Demon. He, he should have died. But he stood up and. And there was Hellfire. Dean got me onto Impala and we got out of the way, but I was useless. My parents told Dean to leave with me and they stayed behind to give us a chance. I couldn’t turn my head, I didn’t see them die like Dean did, but I could see the people burning in the village. And I could hear Dean crying.” He dropped his head into his hands. He would never forget the sound of Dean’s anguish, as
long as he lived.

Sam heard the fabric of Rowena’s dress shift against the chair cushion. “Tell me about the dreams,” she said.

A deep breath. Another. Sam wiped stray tears from his face and sat back up. He stared dully at the garden tools. “I dream of Hellfire. The screams as the people died in our village.” He shivered. “I dream of the Yellow-Eyed Demon and his teeth when he smiled. But I see black-eyed Demons, too, and how they battle each other. I think it’s practice but it’s…it’s disgusting. They rip each other apart. Sometimes with magic, sometimes with bare hands. And I think…” For the next part, he forced himself to look back at Rowena. Dared her to challenge him. “I think I see Lucifer.”

She pursed her lips and sucked a breath in through her nose. “What does he look like?”

“Tall, pale skin. Sandy hair. Light eyes, except for when he’s using his magic. Then they glow this bright…unnatural red. And when he hurts people, he smiles too.”

“Yes,” Rowena said softly. “Sounds like the bastard.”

Sam shook his head, a strand of hair falling in his face, certain he’d misheard. “You know him?” he croaked.

She sighed and looked out the windows into her garden. “There have been many wars, Sam, long before the Border War. I fought against him ere he was ever made king, when his father Charles was trying to purge the land of all the most powerful magical practitioners in the land. No one could catch me, of course, until Lucifer.” She smoothed her dress over her knees. “Hellfire was new back then. He’d cooked it up himself. I had no idea what was coming. I burned, Sam,” she said, tears coloring her voice, though her eyes were hard. “I am not exaggerating when I tell you it was for hours. I was too powerful, even back then, for the fire to make a quick job of it. And yes, Lucifer smiled, and he laughed, and he sat my wee little boy on his lap, and bounced him up and down as I screamed.” She leaned forward in her chair, and Sam mirrored her. “He waited until I was a blackened, burnt out husk before kidnapping my dear Fergus and leaving me for dead. But I was not dead, oh no.” She was gripping the chair arm she was leaning over so hard her knuckles turned white. “My magic recovered me slowly, painfully, layer by layer. And over those wretched months of recovery I swore I’d find him. I’d bide my time until I was powerful enough to take him, and I would rip - him - apart.”

“And then?”
Rowena stiffly uncurled her fingers from the chair and leaned back again. “I had to find Fergus, first. When I found him he was with lesser soldiers and rescuing him was easy work. But he’d been there with Lucifer’s inner circle for almost a year, and he was never the same again, poor boy. Then, I built the lovely cottage you see here before you, and we hid.”

“There’s still so much I don’t understand,” said Sam. “Why was Charles purging magic? And why do Lucifer and his Demons want children so badly?”

“You really are more intelligent than you seem, aren’t you? The answer of one follows the other. Charles,” she began, “or Chuck, when he wasn’t suffering from delusions of grandeur, never much got along with his sister Amara. Their oneupmanship over the centuries caused them to become the most powerful mages in the world. They invented magery, in fact, divorcing from nature and forgetting witchcraft. But then their petty squabbles turned into heated battles. Their mastery engendered eager followers, in some cases worshipers. Their acolytes turned on one another and there was full scale war, even among those without magic of their own. Soon the entire continent had to pick a side, or get crushed in the middle.

“The rest of the world would have been happy to ignore us, I think, but how could they, with earthquakes sending tidal waves across the oceans, and the sun growing dark in the sky? All manner of magic folk poured in from abroad and the war took a turn for the worse. It wasn’t until millions were dead, most of the Coilluanne had been razed, and the climate of the entire planet altered that Chuck and Amara stopped to see what they had done. Too little, too late, of course.

“But it brought them together for one last way to screw us all over. They decided that magic was too dangerous to leave in the hands of just anyone. In order to prevent another war of that power they sought out and destroyed every person they felt had too much potential. So Chuck sent his Angels after them.” She paused. “They at least teach you what Angels are, they must, given what your brother named Castiel?”

Sam nodded, too fascinated to speak.

“Well Chuck’s offspring were the best of them. The Archangels, they were called. They’re old enough to make me look like a spring chicken even now, and they have the centuries of studying magic to match. Michael, Lucifer, Raphael, Gabriel. The greatest warriors of the land: fierce, absolute. The smart Witches hid. The foolish ones perished.” She looked away, clearly counting herself among the latter group, despite her survival. “But when it was finished, Chuck couldn’t bear to strip his sons and daughter of their power, too. Bloody hypocrite.”

“And Amara?”
“She had no children,” Rowena dismissed. “And her most loyal followers had a habit of offering themselves to her willingly as sacrifice. She’d found a way to subsume their powers into her own. What was left was barely human. I’m not even sure they had souls left. Just a wall of empty-eyed warriors moving at her will. Collectively, they were called the Darkness.”

“So, they had no power of their own?”

“Not as such. And they couldn’t lead on their own, either. So instead she gifted them with peace, allowing them to fully move on to the next world. As for the Archangels, she let Chuck split the continent into four kingdoms and give one to each of his children. If they had something of their own, they wouldn’t covet what the others had.”

“What about the rest of the Angels?”

“They were offered a choice no one else was. Willingly let themselves be stripped of their magic and live without, or swear fealty to one of the new monarchs. Few chose Lucifer, whose cruelty was well known, but there were some. Lilith, Alastair. Gabriel refused any who tried. So those who wanted to keep their power mostly went to Michael or his sister Raphael.”

“Like Metatron.”

“Yes, Metatron was an Angel. A poor excuse for one,” she sniffed, “but he has some wiles of his own.”

“But Angels were the elite,” said Sam. “If anyone could have magic, they couldn’t all have been Angels, or part of the Darkness.”

“No,” she agreed. “But then Chuck used a spell with even more power than they had combined.”

“What’s that?”

Rowena’s red lips split into a sardonic smile. “A lie, Sam. A false little idea that spread like Hellfire.”
Sam gasped, everything falling into place. “That only royals were born with magic.”

“Very good. Yes,” she said. “He reasoned that if there were no one to teach them, there would be no one powerful enough to challenge the thrones, and there would be peace everlasting.”

“But there wasn’t.”

“Of course not! A soldier is still a soldier, even in peacetime, and when Lucifer looked to challenge Michael the only way he knew how to respond was with force.”

“Why did he challenge him, though?” Sam asked. “What was worth all that suffering?”

“Lucifer hardly needs a reason to cause suffering,” she said. “Though in this case…here is where we answer your second question. Lucifer didn’t like the lie. That’s why he was snatching children, even back then. Why do you think he took my wee Fergus?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because he inherited my magic, of course. Anyone who was powerful enough could see it and oh, is Lucifer powerful.” She pursed her lips again before continuing. “He thought, if my brothers and sister won’t cultivate magic, I will. I’ll steal their magical children away and through them become greater than my siblings. Greater even than my father.”

“Why children?”

“Because they’re malleable. You can raise a child into a whole world of lies, and most will never see past it if they love you enough.”

“And do they?” asked Sam. “Love him?”

“Yes, Sam, they love him,” she answered solemnly. “They rip each other’s throats out for him.”

Sam turned his head, that very thing flashing in his mind’s eye.
“He tells them that they’re special. That he chose them, and that he was the one who gifted them with magic. And that with a word, he could take it away.”

He snorted. “That’s practically the same lie.”

“It is. As much as he resents Chuck, he’s awfully similar. Though Chuck’s cruelty was often out of neglect, or willful ignorance. Lucifer is cruel deliberately, calculatingly. He’s weakened now, but he won’t stop until the whole of Chamara is under his thumb, if not the world.”

Sam huffed a disbelieving laugh, brain teeming with all the new information. “How do you even know all this?”

“I won’t be caught by him unawares, not again. Knowledge is its own power.” She stared back out the window, jaw clenched.

After a moment he prompted, “Did Michael know?”

She sighed. “And Raphael. Not sure how much success Lucifer has had getting into Lokiland, but for Michaeretz and Rafaelia he has his ways. All but the most powerful of the Angels were dying in their old age and they found themselves with dwindling armies while the ranks of Lucifer’s Demons swelled with his special children. They had no choice but to reintroduce magic themselves.”

“Reapers,” said Sam, already knowing the answer. “We’ve always been told that the king makes the spells and gives them over. But they have their own magic, don’t they?”

“The greatest warriors of the modern era, and they have no idea of their true power,” Rowena agreed. “Some of them must suspect. Most spells won’t work if your own energy isn’t added to the mix. Using magic is like using a muscle. The more you flex it, the greater it grows. The truth will out.”

Sam thought of Billie, and how despite her loyalty to the crown, she was willing to believe them. She was willing to believe that maybe Metatron was not quite the magically ordained monarch he seemed. He thought of Lady Tasha, too, and how she twisted together pouches and poured ingredients into flasks. How Max could handle them with the same deftness, but Alicia could never seem to get them quite right, the mixes changing into the wrong color or releasing pungent smells.
“Anyway, centuries passed. It wasn’t until the Border War that Lucifer must have felt powerful enough to attack Michaeretz in the open. He started in Winchester.”

Sam clenched his fists. Rowena reached over and laid a soothing hand on his arm, and there was nothing suggestive about it.

“Look at me, Sam,” she said, and waited until he met her eyes. “Azazel did target you for your magic, but there’s nothing you could have done. Not even a fully trained Reaper could have taken on a Berserker Demon, let alone a wee boy. The spell he used was to make you come quietly. That’s all.”

“But the dreams—”

“I told you, the truth will out. Even without using it much your magic is growing. It’s manifesting in dreams, which means you probably have the Sight. Berserker magic is strong, overwhelming, and very particularly Lucifer’s spell. Your brain has worried it in its steel jaws again and again and so in your dreams you seek it out. Tell me, when you’re in the dreams, not just watching, it’s as Lucifer, isn’t it?”

Sam sucked in a breath, as she laid his deepest, darkest secret out in the open. “Yes.” His voice cracked. “I’m him.” This time, he couldn’t stop the tears from spilling over, one after the other.

“No.” Rowena squeezed his arm. “No. There is nothing of his tainted magic in your aura. You’re projecting your awareness, nothing more. With the proper training you’ll be able to control it, and all that excess energy won’t take over your dreams.”

“But what if—”

“No what ifs,” she said firmly. “Lucifer, Charles, even Michael have taken so much from me. From you and your brother. From Castiel, from my son, the whole damn world! Do not let them take your power from you, too. Don’t be scared of the only thing that will see you past this. You must embrace it, Sam. Don’t you dare let them win.” The lines of her face were hardened into a snarling mask, and Sam could feel it, her magic, pulsing in the air and shaking the windows, lifting her red curls so they floated around her. Her eyes gleamed bright purple with an inner light.

Her magic wasn’t hurting him, though. It was strong, and so much more than he could fathom, but it
didn’t feel Demonic. It was something all its own: angry, and fierce, but just as desperate in its sorrow. That was something Sam understood. That same morass of emotion lived deep down inside of him, but he didn’t want to run from it anymore. He thought of Castiel, and Metatron, and Dean sobbing almost every night of their childhood when he thought Sam was asleep, as they shivered under the open sky of the plains. This time he wouldn’t, he couldn’t be useless. Not ever again.

“I won’t,” he breathed, little more than a shaky whisper. But he meant it.

Rowena searched his eyes a moment longer before releasing his arm. Her curls bounced back down around her shoulders and the thickness in the air dissipated, her eyes fading back to their normal hue. “Good,” she said. “Well.”

They each took a moment to gather themselves. Sam watched a spider amble across the floorboards.

Rowena recovered first. Abruptly she stood, squaring her shoulders. “Sadly, Lucifer is a matter that will have to wait another day. One mess at a time. So let’s go take a look at the prince and see what can be done, hm?” She opened the back door and marched into the garden without so much as a glance back.

Sam gave himself another moment, wiping his face as best he could. “I won’t,” he repeated to himself. Then he drew a deep breath, and followed the witch outside.
Dean and Castiel stood in the garden, Dean stroking his neck and gently untangling any knots he found in his mane. He figured someone would come out to find them eventually, and sure enough a few minutes later Crowley cleared his throat. He was leaning against the back corner of the cottage, and when Dean glanced over he nodded behind them, at the tree they were standing under. “Apples,” he said.

That couldn’t be right. The tree was dripping with white flowers and their perfume filled the air. No way could there be fruit. But sure enough, when he bothered to look up, ripe red apples dotted the boughs. Crowley sauntered over and plucked one from its stem, ruby in color and entirely unblemished. He held it out to Castiel. “To make up for the tea,” he said.

Cas snorted, but accepted the offering, snatching it right from his hand and grinding it to a pulp in a few short chomps. Though Castiel seemed to trust him, Dean eyed the mage warily.

If Crowley noticed, he didn’t acknowledge it. “My mother’s been cultivating this tree for centuries,” he told them. “Witchcraft is messy, but has its own beauty, at times.”

Dean couldn’t argue that. The garden was haphazard and more than half creepy, but it was hearty and thriving. Cas stretched his neck and chose another apple for himself, straight from the tree.

“Come along, Sam!” called Rowena, rounding the back of the cottage. Sam appeared a moment later looking tired, but hell, who wasn’t? Rowena halted next to Cas and put her hands on her hips. “What do you think, Fergus? Learn anything at that university of yours that could reverse the dear prince’s enchantment?”

“No,” he said shortly.

“I thought not. Ah, well,” she said.

“Wait,” said Dean. “Are you saying he’s going to be stuck like this forever?”

The stallion stilled, and they all waited for her answer. “Unlikely,” Rowena answered. Sam, Dean, and Cas let out a collective breath. “He’s not really a horse, remember. Nature always finds a way to restore balance, no matter how impossible it seems.”
“The truth will out,” said Sam.

“Yes, exactly,” she smiled, though it was with approval rather than flirtation, thank the gods. “But we could be looking at decades, even centuries. Let’s see if we can’t hurry the process along a little, shall we? Move back boys.” She waved her hand at Sam and Dean, who dutifully moved a few feet away. Rowena and Crowley began circling Castiel who, after a few minutes, heaved a longsuffering sigh and looked for more apples. Dean sat down in the grass, leaning his back against an enormous pumpkin, and Sam slowly followed suit.

After another minute of listening to the witches sniping at each other and muttering about spells and ingredients, Sam nudged him. “So, uh, get this,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Remember how they said that commoners can be born with magic too?”

Dean nodded.

Sam ducked his head and looked up at him through his bangs, like he did when he was still shorter than Dean. “Well, uh, Rowena says I have it. Have magic.”

Dean stared, the idea tumbling round and round in his head. Finally, he said, “The dreams?”

“Yes!” Sam exclaimed. “It wasn’t the Yellow-Eyed Demon after all. He didn’t infect me. I know you always wondered since then whether I wasn’t quite right—”

“Sam—”

“And I always felt so unclean. But it’s okay. I just need to learn to control it.” He huffed a laugh. “Who knew it could be so simple?”

“Doesn’t sound simple to me.”
“Not the actual learning, I suppose.” Sam ducked his head again. “You’re not…mad, are you?”

A prince for a horse and a mage for a little brother. Why not? “Nah,” he sighed. “Just no killing rabbits for parts, okay Sammy?”

“Ew, gods no!” said Sam, and Dean chuckled.

The brothers relaxed and let themselves be entertained, watching in amusement as Castiel patiently nudged the witches apart when their disagreements got heated. A bee buzzed around overhead before tucking itself into a nearby flower.

“What does ‘semantic’ mean?” Dean asked.

“Hm?” Sam startled out of a light sleep.

“Rowena said that if witches and mages live long enough, the difference between godhood and magic would only be *semantic*.”

“Oh, right,” he said, yawning. “Semantics is the study of words and their meanings. She was saying that practically, a mage or whoever could eventually become powerful enough to seem godlike whether they were divine or not. I think she meant Chuck and Amara.”

Dean eyed him incredulously. “*Chuck*?”

“That’s what Rowena called him,” and then Sam launched into a winding explanation of sibling rivalry and global war and the division of the continent, followed by another sibling rivalry and the frankly terrifying revelation that the rumors about Demons kidnapping children were true and Sam was nearly one of the them.

“The fuck,” said Dean, when he was done. Just a year ago Dean had had nothing more to worry about than how many stalls he had to muck out in the morning. A few months ago he just wanted to protect a horse that was getting hurt. A few days ago he was seriously worried about his job, and now? Magic was apparently more common than they were, his life and his brother’s were in danger from their king, the kingdom in turn was in danger from Lucifer without a strong leader to safeguard
them, and their best hope to depose the king was a man who’d been turned into a horse as a boy and had no practical experience. Besides which, crowning him in this climate was as bad as throwing him to the wolves.

“I know,” said Sam, closing his eyes again. “Everything makes so much more sense now.”

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Dinner was a low-key affair out in the garden. Castiel had had his fill of apples and grass, and was dozing nearby where they had a blanket laid out. They feasted on the bounty of the trees and bushes, fruits from all seasons, and bread and cheese from the larder and fresh water from a spigot that pumped itself.

“The major difference between magery and witchcraft,” Crowley was pontificating, “is that magery aims to be precise. Each spell should produce the same result at the same intensity, every time. It’s not that you can’t be precise with witchcraft,” he acknowledged, “but that it allows for a certain flexibility.”

“What he means is that intention carries more weight, when you approach magic more naturally,” said Rowena, popping a blueberry into her mouth. She was lying on her side, head propped up in her hand. “Between Fergus and Castiel we have a decent idea of what spells may have joined together, but that’s only half the problem.”

“You need to know what Metatron’s intent was,” said Sam.

“That’s easy,” Dean snorted. “He was going to use Hellfire. He wanted Cas dead.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” said Crowley, swatting away an intrepid fly. “The spell is still active. We have to consider what he was intending in the attack, but also his more recent intent.”

“For him to suffer, then,” said Dean. The sun was down past the trees and reached them weakly, but some of the odd plants and flowers glowed with faint blue and purple luminescence, flashing off Castiel’s black coat, highlighting the white scars.

“Don’t underestimate his pettiness,” Crowley returned. “Metatron wanted Castiel’s position, his power. The whole mess of his jealousy and frustration is what underlies his wish to harm.”
“In essence,” said Rowena, “his intent was to separate Castiel from his power and from his people. He was convinced of the prince’s unworthiness. Ergo, the prince must prove himself worthy.”

“Like in a fairy tale?” Sam asked incredulously.

“Yes, witchcraft and trials and lessons learned,” she agreed. “Didn’t I already tell you the folklore is true?” She winked and pushed another berry between her lips.

“Quit dancing around it,” said Dean. “What you’re saying is we have to go back to Mt. Heaven to have any chance of resolving this.”

Crowley took a final bite of an apple and tossed the core over his shoulder. “There’s always more than one way, but that would probably be the most expedient. We’ll have to find allies, come at Metatron from a place of strength.”

“What allies?” asked Dean.

“Other witches in hiding, for a start,” said Crowley. “We’ll have to find them, first. Try for the royal courts of Raphael and Gabriel and recruit mages there, if not the monarchs themselves.”

“Good luck with that,” said Rowena, half under her breath.

“We’re looking at a couple of years to get everyone we need, five on the outside.”

“That’s not good enough!” Dean shouted. The others startled, and a bird flapped away from inside a bush, squawking. Castiel woke from his doze. “By that time Metatron will have run the country into the ground and Lucifer will be knocking on our doorstep!”

“Then what do you suggest?” Crowley sneered.

“That we go now. It’ll take us a week to get back to the capital if we want to be well rested by the time we get there. And the longer we wait, the more Reapers will return and the more allies Metatron
will have. Getting to him while he’s most vulnerable is the only chance we’re going to get.”

Sam looked at him, his big brain churning. “I agree with that,” he said. “But the castle is still going to be guarded. We have to find a reason for him to give us an audience without a fight. Try to find an even playing field for Castiel to confront him.”

“Easy,” said Dean. “We give him what he wants.” He turned to the prince. “You and me.”

The others contemplated this for a moment.

“That just might work,” said Crowley, surprised.

“Bollocks,” Rowena sighed, sitting up. “I guess I have to let the horse into the house after all.” When Sam and Dean gave her twin confused looks, she gave them a smug smile. “You want to get there as soon as possible? If I have a few hours to prepare, I can get us there in less than a day.”

“How?” asked Sam.

Rowena looked at him appraisingly, then smiled a wicked little smile. She leaned forward. “Ready for your first lesson in witchcraft, dearie?”

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The fire was still crackling merrily in the cottage. Rowena bustled around the main room, lighting candles by pinching the wicks with her thumb and forefinger. Crowley opened one of the cupboards and pulled out a tall clear bottle with amber liquid and a glass of cut crystal. He settled at the table to drink and managed to look impressively unimpressed, as only many years in a royal court could teach you to do. Dean stood behind the table next to the round window, where Castiel had once again stuck his head, and Sam stood in the middle of the room, turning to watch as Rowena flit to and fro.

“Now,” she said, shooing Sam back a step. She grabbed the edge of the large woven rug and tugged it over to the wall, revealing a circular trap door. It was inlaid with smooth stone and mother of pearl in an intricate design, arcane symbols in slashes and swirls.
“Cool,” said Sam, bending to examine it.

“Thank you, Sam. It’s fine work, if I say so myself.” She crouched next to him, her green dress pooling around her. “This is a rather complex version of a protection sigil. I used my own blood to seal it.”

Dean grimaced and just barely bit back a gross!

“The result is that no one but my own flesh and blood can open this door. Go on, try it.”

Sam picked up the metal handle from where it was embedded in the middle of the door, and pulled. When it didn’t move, he curled both hands around it and tried again, with all the considerable strength he had from a decade of mucking stalls and wrangling horses. Still nothing: not even a squeak from the screws keeping the handle in place.

Rowena set a hand on his arm—a bit too firmly, in Dean’s opinion—to stop his effort. “And yet…” she said, and opened the door herself with very little effort. She stood, and Sam followed suit. “Welcome to my study, Mr. Winchester.” She lightly stepped into the cellar, and Sam eagerly clomped down after her.

Dean was torn. Even though Rowena had agreed to help, she was still a very powerful witch convinced his brother had magic, and she probably kept animals parts down there, and jars of blood, and every gruesome fairy tale the villagers used to tell around the bonfire came back to Dean in stunning detail. On the other hand, it seemed unfair to leave Castiel behind, as Rowena had declared she wasn’t letting him in until it could no longer be avoided.

“Go on,” said Crowley, taking a generous swallow of his liquor, and then gesturing to the horse with his glass. “The prince and I are well used to each other’s company.”

Dean looked to Cas, who made no indication he was uncomfortable with the arrangement. “Be right back,” he said, giving him a pat.

The steps into the cellar were steep, but made surprisingly of stone. The room was big enough to be underneath the entire garden, not just the cottage itself. It was lit by a series of lanterns glowing with a steady purple light, both hanging from the ceiling amidst drying herbs and in sconces on the walls. When he looked at one close up, he saw they were filled with luminescent flower blossoms.
The floor, too, was stone, less like true masonry and more like a series of irregular rocks made smooth by a powerful river like the Voda, or perhaps the constant passage of feet. The walls were sod, and roots webbed across them, thin as veins and thick as branches. Shelves of various heights and widths were lined up all around the circular cellar with jars of ingredients, yes, but also books: more books than they’d ever seen in once place.

Sam stood wide-eyed in the center of it. “You have a library,” he said in awe.

Rowena laughed, pulling a few from the shelves and bringing them to a large work table, then strutted away to grab some more. “You’ve never been in a rich person’s house, have you, Sam?”

Eagerly Sam grabbed the first book in the pile, a large, fat tome with faded gilding and peeling edges. Dean peered over his shoulder to look, too. Each page had to neat columns of handwritten text, letters made up of thick swooping lines with words all smushed together and for Dean, impossible to even decipher whether or not it was written in Michaeretzer. Around the text were fanciful borders of flowers and shapes in all sorts of colors, and some even had proper illustrations in the corners or at beginnings of chapters: snakes wrapped around a giant letter S, or unicorns with sharp spiraled horns.

“Look at this!” Sam exclaimed, pointing to a knight fighting a giant snail, and losing.

Dean really did not want to know.

He left his brother to the books, and did a little more exploring. Between the irregular gaps the shelves made, something was shining in the sod, where no roots penetrated. He grabbed one of the hanging flower lanterns and titled it closer.

It was glass, and iron. Circular windows with four panes, just like the ones above. Only, these windows didn’t look out into the world, but were pressed against dirt, buried underground. As Dean watched, a worm wriggled out of the dark, scooched across the glass a couple inches, then burrowed its way back into the ground. “Ugh!” he grimaced, letting the lantern go. It swung, its chain creaking on its hook.

“That should do it,” said Rowena. She juggled several glass jars in her arms, and had a few cinched bags dangling from her elbows. “If you strapping young lads could get the books?”

The brothers obligingly stacked her chosen books into even towers and hefted them back up the
steep steps. They were surprisingly heavy. Blinking in the bright yellow light of the main room again, they set the books down on the table next to Crowley, and Rowena—after kicking the trapdoor shut behind her—lined up her ingredients on the workbench. “Bring me Arachne’s Grimoire,” she commanded, holding out a hand without turning around.

“Ah…” said Sam, looking at the dozen books, most with covers so old and faded their titles could no longer be discerned.

“Dark purple as to be black and half a hand thick, chop chop.”

Sam quickly sorted the books and found the grimoire and took it to Rowena. She set it down and it cracked open to what must have been a frequently used page. Then she started listing ingredients and pointing them out to Sam, who interspersed her instructions with questions. He looked just as happily focused as he did whenever Lady Tasha spared him some time to talk about her work, or Rufus taught them how to shape certain equipment, or even when Bobby explained the detailed accounts he had to keep on the cost of running the stables. Dean felt the pang he always did whenever he was reminded of the reality that neither of them would get more than the practical education required for their jobs. Sam was so bright, and such a quick study. He would thrive at the university.

“Well,” said Crowley, setting his empty glass on the table with a definitive snick. “Now that my mother’s found someone else she delights in bossing around, and tomorrow we’re taking on king and possibly country, I’m off to bed. I suggest you do so as well.” He stood and smoothed out his jacket. To Castiel he sketched a small bow. “Your Highness.” Then he slipped through the door to the sun room. Dean could hear him climb the stairs, and then walk across the creaky wooden floorboards above.

Dean noted that he hadn’t suggested exactly where Dean was supposed to get some rest, but looking at the horse still with his head in the window, he figured it didn’t matter. Sam seemed fine, no cute and fuzzy creatures were being maniacally ripped apart, and one more night in the outdoors wouldn’t hurt. “Sammy.”

“Yeah?” he said, looking over his shoulder.

“We’ll be outside.”

“’Kay,” he answered, and refocused on Rowena. He pointed something out in the book. “What language is that word?”
Dean smiled to himself, picked up his pack, and went out the front door, closing it gently behind him. He walked around the side of the cottage, stepping through the flowers and the mushrooms, to find Castiel meeting him halfway. The moon was just rising over the treetops, casting a white glow atop the blues and purples of the garden, lifting the horse’s black coat out of shadow.

“You need anything?” Dean asked him.

Cas shook his head.

“You hooves feel okay?”

Cas nodded.

“I, uh…” Dean rubbed the back of his neck and looked away awkwardly. “People like privacy when they sleep, and I know you haven’t had a lot of that as a horse, and I’m sorry Sammy and took a nap on you yesterday, and I hope it’s okay if I sleep outside too, but if it bothers you…” He glanced back up to gauge the prince’s reaction.

Castiel nickered lightly, and Dean was pretty sure he was being laughed at. Then the horse turned toward the back of the cottage, body trailing after the graceful curve of his neck. He ambled past the stained glass of the sun room, now dim in the moonlight, and found a nice large patch of grass within the garden fence. The stallion heaved himself down with a sigh, then blinked at Dean expectantly.

Dean chose his own patch of grass nearby, close enough to be companionable but far enough that he wouldn’t accidentally get kicked as they slept. He plumped up his pack as best he could, wrapped an arm around it, then laid his head to rest. “Night, Cas,” he murmured, and fell asleep with the horse’s rumbling response in his ears.

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Dean awoke in the pre-dawn light to the chirping of birds, and the steady rip of grass as Castiel grazed for breakfast. When he opened his eyes, a bunny getting in its dark spring coat was snuffling right in front of him. A smile slowly spread across his face. “Hi, buddy,” he told it. “Better get out of here before the mean witch lady puts you in the cellar.”

Castiel nickered, definitely laughing at him this time. The bunny hopped away.
“Yeah, yeah, yuk it up, big guy,” he said, chuckling a little himself as he sat up. He stretched, groaning, and looked around. The lightening sky was clear of clouds, or at least what he could see of it in the middle of a forest, and the cottage chimney was still active, smoking spilling out of its mouth and fading away. The garden shimmered with dew.

Through the windows of the sun room, dim but still discernible was the shape of his sleeping little brother, giant form twisted across the two wicker chairs. Dean hauled himself to his feet and went up to a clear pane of the glass, cupping his face on either side to peer in. Sam was lying on his back, right arm trailing to the ground, but his left leg pulled his lower half to the side, up and over his right, and bent at an awkward angle. Castiel approached at his shoulder to see what he was looking at. Dean grinned at him and winked, knocking hard on the window.

The reaction was instant and hilarious. Sam startled and tried sitting up, but his scrambled limbs pulled him off the chairs and onto the floor. Dean laughed, the first real laugh for days. His brother sat on the tiles and glared. “Not funny,” he said, muffled through the glass.

Breakfast that morning turned out to be a quick affair of scrambled eggs with bread and butter. Crowley put on a plain, homespun apron to make it, protecting his fancy clothes. Rowena, in a beautiful blue dress, made them a different tea, dark with a slight hint of fruit. Dean might have been imagining it, but he felt it give him a little more energy, which was good as they spent the meal hashing out the details of the plan. Castiel, again forced to join via the round window by the table, snorted and nickered, making his opinion known through Crowley’s interpretation—and sometimes Dean’s, when the mage deliberately misread the horse’s body language.

But finally it was all settled, and there was nothing left to do but return to Mt. Heaven.

“So how are we doing this?” asked Dean.

Rowena smiled, lips again painted a deep red. “Watch, and learn. But first—” She went to the front door and placed a hand on either side of the frame. She closed her eyes, chanting under her breath, and the wood moved as if alive. It stretched and groaned, the cottage creaking in protest, and grew to half again in size. Rowena opened her eyes. “There we go,” she said. She turned the knob and stuck her head outside. “You can come in now, princeling.”

Castiel backed out of the window and trotted around the cottage. His hooves clip-clopped on the stone path, then clomped on the cottage floorboards. The stallion looked even bigger than usual in the space not at all meant for his current species. He carefully maneuvered himself to the middle of the room and stood awkwardly between the table and the workbench.
Rowena sighed. “I suppose that will have to do. Now, is everybody ready?”

“Just get on with it,” said Crowley, sitting at the table with a book.

With a hmph Rowena whirled around and strode to her workbench, red curls whipping behind her. “Come watch, Sam,” she said. Sam hurried to obey, and Dean followed, interested to see more magic at work despite himself. A wide silver bowl was placed in the center of the bench, with several smaller bowls and jars sat around it like satellites, the ingredients she and Sam had prepared the night before. The witch poured them into the bowl in an order which made sense to her, precise and quick in her movements. She pinched the slightest bit of powder here, plucked a certain number of leaves from a dried stem there. When the mixture started to smoke without any use of flint or fire, Dean back away; then he was glad he did, because Rowena drew out a knife from the folds of her dress and dragged it across her own palm, dripping blood into the bowl.

“Brace yourselves,” she said, rolling up her sleeves. She plunged her hands into the bowl, and smeared the concoction along her arms, coating herself from elbow to fingertip. Then she turned toward the room at large, lifting her hands in the air.

She chanted. With each word her voice grew deeper, more resonant. After a moment her eyes started glowing purple, and purple runes appeared in intricate patterns over the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Vibrations rumbled beneath their feet, then all at once the entire cottage shuddered and moved. Sam and Dean stumbled against the workbench while Cas whinnied in surprise. The brothers peeked out the window over the bench, and saw that the entire property, garden and all, was floating like an island above the forest. No, not floating—massive gnarled roots sprouted from beneath the garden but outside the fence, and angled down with joints that looked like tree knots. Then, as they watched, the roots moved. Like legs. Like giant, living, tree branch spider legs.

The cottage was like a giant spider made of plants.

“Nope,” said Dean, pushing away from the window and plastering himself to the wall.

The cottage rocked back and forth as it scuttled away.
Of the two Winchesters, Sam was the first to regain his bearings. As Rowena washed her hands, he peppered her with questions about how much energy it took, how the cottage could be steered, how the hell the legs could move so freely in the thick forest. The witch seemed perfectly content to indulge his curiosity, especially since it meant she could use him as a pack mule to help move things back into the cellar which, Dean realized with a shudder, was literally a root cellar.

Crowley was supremely unbothered by the rolling motion of the cottage, even pouring himself another cup of tea without spilling a drop. Castiel had made his way to the window in the wall next to the front door and was looking out. Clutching the workbench and doing his best not to fall over, Dean joined him. When he looked out the window too, he saw what had the prince so entranced.

The Greenwood Forest lived up to its name, the treetops spread all around them like a luscious green
carpet under pure blue sky. Leaves rustled and branches snapped as the cottage’s legs navigated the terrain, startling birds from their nests and sending them flocking into the sky. A few paced them for a moment, chittering angrily. By the flap of their wings and how they either veered off or were left behind, he calculated with no little trepidation that the cottage was crawling faster than a gallop.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

The cottage gave a sudden lurch, and Dean stumbled into Cas.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, scrabbling against him to steady himself, only to grab back on when the cottage lurched the other direction.

Castiel nickered his little laugh, one blue eye on Dean and the other on the window.

Dean sighed and resigned himself to the reality of the situation, slinging an arm over the horse’s shoulders. His cheeks burned with embarrassment; he was flapping around like an idjit and using the crown prince as little more than a piece of furniture. But, when Cas in no way indicated he was upset with the situation, he tried to relax.

The forest rolled by.

“Are you sure about this?” Dean asked, soft enough to escape Crowley’s hearing across the room.

Castiel gave him an expressive look that Dean took to mean This was your plan, buddy.

“I know, it’s just…You already had to let me ride you and that must have been bad enough. But having to wear a saddle and all the gear and having people see you that way…It’s one thing for a horse, but for a prince?”

Cas snorted and flicked his tail, the long hairs brushing against Dean. I am a horse.

“Okay,” he replied. “If you say so.”
Within a couple of hours, they were free of the forest. As soon as the cottage crossed the threshold into the prairie, it hunkered closer to the ground, the tree-legs bending more sharply and the building sitting low between them. It moved even more freely in the open air, scuttling up and down the hills of Winchester before speedily crawling its way across the flatlands. Though they avoided towns and villages, they could not avoid all living things in Michaeretz. Bands of horses scattered at their approach, and more than once the roots had to bury themselves deep into the sod when riders were spotted in the distance. During those tense moments, Dean actually wished for them to be roaming horse-eaters like his mother’s family, instead of knights.

Thankfully no one decided to inspect the cottage, which looked perfectly normal from a distance, and they were back on their way.

Soon—too soon, and not soon enough—the shining pinnacle of the royal castle atop Mt. Heaven glinted at the edge of the northern horizon. Then the entire city could be seen, the gargantuan butte the only thing visible for miles across the prairie. As they drew closer, they had to squat down more and more often to avoid travelers. Then they were too close to the farms on the outskirts of the capital, and could go no further.

Rowena waved her hand, the runes faded back into the walls, and the cottage set itself gently down on the plains a little after midday.

It was time.

Crowley handed him a green stone, perfectly round and polished. “Don’t lose it,” he said.

Dean nodded, his throat too dry to speak properly. He slipped it into his pocket, slung his pack over his shoulder, and gave Sam a hug. “Be safe,” he said lowly, just for his ears.

His brother squeezed him a little harder. “You too.”

Then he stepped back, steeling himself. He nodded at Rowena, then looked at Cas. “You ready?”

The horse nickered and faced the door, waiting.
“Then let’s do this.”

He opened the door and walked down the garden path, Castiel right behind him. The thorny gate opened of its own accord, ushering them out.

“May I?” Dean asked. Cas nodded, so he hauled himself onto the horse’s back and found his seat.

The cottage door slammed shut, and the garden gate curled back into the hedge. Dean and Cas watched as the spidery tree legs lifted back out of the ground and propelled the property away, taking Sam and the witches with it. Dean shuddered. “Just not natural.”

Castiel rumbled in agreement.

The ride back to Horsetown was uneventful at first. The farms were sparsely populated enough for them to pass through unrecognized, but as they trotted closer to the stables and the surrounding buildings Dean swallowed, heart pounding. Then a figure came galloping toward them through the outer ring of cottages, someone riding—no, just a horse.

An enormous, pitch black horse.

All Dean’s fears melted away. “Impala!” he shouted. “Baby!”

She tossed her head and whinnied, not slowing down at all. With no prompting from Dean, Castiel matched her speed and in no time at all Dean was slipping from his back and throwing his arms around Impala’s neck.

“Oh Baby, I missed you,” he mumbled, heedless of his tears wetting her coat. “I missed you so much. Did they hurt you?” He let her go so he could get a good look at her. The way she hopped and danced around him in her joy, giddy as a filly, was answer enough. She was healthy and gorgeous as always; in fact it looked like she’d recently been groomed.

“Dean!”
He tore his eyes away from his beautiful, perfect horse, in time to see Bobby dismounting from a chestnut riding horse, though free of tack. “Bobby!” Dean grinned.

“You damn idjit,” Bobby said, putting a hand on the side of Dean’s face, searching it. Then his own face crumpled, and he pulled Dean into a hug. “You’re okay.”

“Yeah, Bobby, I’m fine.”

“Well forgive me for worrying,” the stablemaster huffed, releasing him and settling back into his ornery self. “I know how you two boys love Impala, and that you’d never separate unless the worst had happened. She just comes strolling into the stables yesterday, pretty as you please, not another person in sight.”

“Tessa caught up to us and used a Lasso spell on her. We couldn’t—we had to—” He felt the grief all over again, and drank in the feeling of being near his horse, who tucked her head over his shoulder in protection, just like she used to. He curled into the embrace, unashamed.

“Now you mention it, Tessa came back with her group of knights about an hour before she showed up. Used magic to bring them from one place to another, apparently, as half of them were vomiting over it.” Bobby looked past Dean at Castiel, then scanned the area. “Where’s Sam?”

“He’s safe. With friends.”

“Who? Never mind.” Bobby shook his head. “I thought I told you boys to leave and not look back. Then Impala’s causing a ruckus and you’re here hollering to wake the dead when half this place thinks you’re a traitor.”

The corner of Dean’s lip quirked up. “Just half?”

“More than enough,” he said grimly. “Why are you here?”

“Look, it’s a long story but we figured out why Metatron wants Ca—Angel so badly. And it’s nothing good.”
“So?”

“So I need tack and a full set of royal horse armor.”

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“You want what?” asked Rufus.

Since it was well known that Impala had returned riderless, Castiel walked between her and Bobby’s horse, and Dean did his best to look inconspicuous between them. Thusly they ghosted their way through Horsetown, making a beeline for the tack room. There Dean waited with Cas and Impala while Bobby went to fetch Rufus.

“Horse armor. Royal.” Dean was swiftly braiding Castiel’s mane so that it would fit neatly under a criniere. “I know not all of it is up in the city.”

“Boy we don’t have time to figure out which smith would be willing to help us make adjustments!”

“Benny,” Dean answered immediately.

“Are you sure?” asked Bobby.

“Yes.”

Bobby lifted his cap, ran a hand through his hair, and plopped it back on. “Shit. I’ll go find him.”

Rufus rolled his eyes to the heavens as Bobby made a swift exit. “Fine. This fool horse better not kick me.”

Dean smiled. “He won’t. Will you, Angel?”
Cas turned his head and blew air directly in his face.

Rufus examined the black stallion with an expert eye, mumbling to himself about sizing and adjustments. Then he pulled out a metal ring with several keys on it, and opened an unassuming door in the back of the room. “Feel free to help,” he called behind him as he entered.

Dean finished off the last of Cas’s mane and hurried after him. The outer room had saddles and halters, reins and bridles, all the equipment for every day riding or drafting. Armor belonging to the horses of particular knights were kept with that knights’ armor in storage in their own estates. But this inner room, which Dean had almost never been allowed into, held armor rarer by far. Some of it was of an older style, since fallen out of fashion, like armor made of glittering scales that would drape over a horse like a cloak, tightly woven mats of wicker, leather in a thickness that had long been made obsolete by the best archers. There were foreign pieces, like a chanfron with devil’s horns from Luciterra, ancient bronze armor from Rafaelia, and even a few prize chest plates from other lands across the oceans.

But pride of place was an entire set of horse armor, black and gleaming, with silver designs as polished as the day it was new. The plates for the neck, flanks, and hindquarters were simply outlined in the silver, but the chest plate was a finely rendered set of outspread wings. More stunning was the chanfron, which would fit over the horse’s face; feathers were etched into the metal around the nose and cheekbones, curling around and up to the ears, where they leapt from the metal into two upturned wings. The armor was smooth and black around the eyes, except for a single blue gemstone nestled amid silver flames, an ornament for the forehead.

“King Michael’s horse wore this, the day he died,” Rufus said. “It should fit Angel with little issue. This what you need?”

“Yeah,” said Dean, eyes wide. “It’s perfect.”

They wasted no more time. They started hauling the armor out, piece by piece, inspecting them for damage. For all other equipment they chose pieces of black leather and shiny silver buckles. Dean had just set about giving Castiel a quick brush when Bobby burst back in, Benny in tow.

Everyone paused and looked at each other. Benny opened his mouth, closed it, rubbed his bearded chin. Then he sighed and dropped a bag with his tools on the nearest table. He didn’t even ask, which was friendship indeed. “I hope you know what you’re doing, brother,” he drawled in his southeastern twang.

Thankfully Rufus had kept the metal in good shape, and nothing needed the forge to be fixed. Benny
knocked out a few dents while Dean and Bobby finished the grooming, and Rufus picked out a lovely blue and gold cloth for under the saddle. Then, between Bobby and Rufus’s knowhow, they made quick work of assembling it on Castiel himself, all under Impala’s curious gaze.

When they were done, Castiel was magnificent. Proud he stood, regal. A prince among horses.

“Now what?” asked Bobby.

“Now,” said Dean, swinging himself into the saddle, “we visit the king.”
So it was that in the middle of the afternoon on a lovely spring day, a groom in his homespun clothes and bare feet rode to Mt. Heaven on a royal steed.

The people of Horsetown recognized Dean immediately, and the king’s horse, but so astounded were they by the stallion’s sudden docility they made no move to stop them as they turned onto the road.

Horse and rider approached the city at a sedate walk. Though not the busiest time of day, the road still had a fair number of travelers; farmers heading back to the homestead with empty wagons gawked and let the reins go slack, riding parties pulled to a stop and made way, and a few pedestrians forgot their business and turned to follow.

The soldiers who guarded the southern city gate, largely a formality in recent years, at first saw only that there was horse and rider with particularly shiny equipment. As they drew closer, the shine resolved itself to show a fierce-looking black stallion geared up for battle, and a young man riding him who very much was not. Hesitantly their hands hovered over sword hilts and crossbows. Their commander, however, was a veteran of the Border War, and remembered well the time she saw Michael on the last day of his life, riding a horse with that very same armor. Moved at the unexpected sight, she stood down her soldiers. Horse, rider, and a dozen followers passed into the city.

There were multiple ways to navigate a city as big and old as Mt. Heaven, but the main road with paved white stones wound round and round the edge of the butte before curling to the castle at the peak, an hour’s journey if no haste was made. Still the splendid horse walked, carrying his plain rider up the incline with nary a complaint. His hooves rang loud in the pocket of silence that surrounded them, the people who moment before had been rushing to leave the city now frozen in astonishment. Following the curve of the road, they passed through the lowest neighborhoods of Mt. Heaven, with its poorest people. Some residents wondered why someone with a horse so fine had bothered coming to their part of town, but many had been in the infantry during the Border War, and their hearts filled with pain and joy at once. They remembered Queen Hannah, who used to walk their streets in glittering crown, but had still seen them, had used the power she wielded for the benefit of all her subjects. They whispered prayers in her honor and those who were able, followed.

At just the same pace horse and rider walked the road through the middle height of the city, where the merchant class made and sold their wares. The markets took advantage of the wide thoroughfare, stalls stretching for miles, and citizens from every strata of society bought goods according to their means. The haggling stopped; buskers put down their instruments. The craftsmen recognized immediately that the armor was no cheap substitute, and pickpockets lost sight of their targets to gaze at the richness before them. But for once, no one in the market was concerned with coin. They remembered a time when such displays were shared, not just shown, when the taxes they paid did
not simply disappear into wealthy coffers. The children gasped in delight and dared to brush their fingers across the horse’s silver stirrups, the long black tail. When they were not kicked aside by his rider, they laughed with joy, and they followed.

Still to the top of the butte the horse walked, through streets lined with great estates with high walls that wished to keep others out. Hired guards there were wary less of steed and his weaponless rider, than the swell of people who walked behind them. Carriages were forced to a standstill, and litters—newly brought into fashion by the current king—had to be set down entirely. But no one complained once their jeweled hands drew back the curtains shading them from the outside world. The noble residents of these great houses, whose views from Mt. Heaven onto the lower city and the surrounding lands were unsurpassed in scope, could not quite remember ever having seen a sight so strange and wondrous as a royal steed ridden by a boy as poor as he so clearly was, as if he had the right. Those who were knights, and knew of the strife between the groom, the horsemaster, and the king, ordered their conveyances to be turned, and they followed.

And so it was that in the middle of the afternoon on a lovely spring day, a groom riding a royal steed arrived at the castle with a large train of people in their wake.
Word of their coming had clearly preceded them.

Castiel halted. Before Dean could decide what to say to the guards, the gates to the castle swung open without prompting to reveal the king himself.

“Dean Winchester,” Metatron said with false warmth, loud enough for all the spectators to hear. “Welcome!”

He held an arm out to the side, inviting them in. Castiel walked, hooves loud on the stone above the whispers of the crowd, and passed the threshold into the courtyard. Dean glanced behind them and saw how the guards preventing anyone else from following. The heavy doors swung back shut.

Dean subtly let out a long breath. He and Cas were still alive, and where they needed to be. They just had to trust that Sam, Rowena, and Crowley were where they needed to be as well.

“They told me that you’d stolen my horse,” the king continued as he walked across the open square to the castle proper. He was still laying it on thick for the guards and attendants that paced them. “But it looks like you just needed a little time to finish breaking him in. Dean, you have made your king proud today.”

Dean said nothing. Castiel held back his rage and played at being dispirited.

Metatron preceded them into the castle, purple cloak swishing as he climbed the steps. They had barely followed him inside into the Great Hall when he split off to the side toward a small door hidden behind a column. “Somebody bring me Gadreel,” he commanded before disappearing.

A pageboy rushed off to do as bid, and a royal attendant stepped in front of Castiel, and ignored him in favor of his rider. “King Metatron will speak with you in the audience chamber. Please, follow me.” She waited, expecting for Dean to dismount. When he did not, and said nothing, she turned on her heel and led him across the hall.

It looked the same, and yet different from when he’d been there last fall. It was still just as grand with
its high vaulted ceilings and colorful frescoes, its expensive marble floor, but now that Dean knew Metatron for what he really was, and what wielding the power of a king really meant, it had lost its intimidating veneer.

They passed from there to the hallway, the timbre of Castiel’s hoofbeats changing as he stepped onto the elegant runner. This time Dean ignored the spindly-legged tables with their large vases, the mirrors in their ornate frames, the paintings of people long dead. All but one: when they finally reached the antechamber for the throne room, and the attendant held up her hand to bid them wait, both he and Castiel looked at the painting of Michael in battle. Castiel stamped, the only sign of nervousness he’d shown thus far. Dean leaned over to whisper in his ear, “I have faith in you.”

From some unseen signal, the guards stationed at the door, their white and gold livery bright against their dark wood, stepped aside. The doors swung inward, and when they stopped, only then did their guide walk forward.

The throne room, too, was as Dean had remembered it, though now the statue behind the golden chair was completely draped in a white cloth. The marble floor and columns were polished to a shine, and the statues between them were still frozen in perpetual movement: Angels and kings, gods and monsters. A bright red runner unfurled before them to the other side of the room, a clear path to the king.

Metatron, via some inner passageway, had beaten them to the room. He sat on the throne in his purple cloak and his golden crown, and a small stool propped up his feet where they otherwise would have dangled, undignified. At his right hand stood Gadreel, his livery crisp and clean, his posture stiff as ever. A sword hung from his belt.

Though the ride up the butte had been long, the walk from the entrance of the room to the dais upon which the throne sat felt interminably longer. The attendant led the way, until several feet before the bottom step Metatron held up a hand. “Thank you. That will be all.”

She bowed deeply. “Your Majesty.” She straightened back up except for her head, then walked backwards all the way down the runner and out the doorway. The doors shut of their own accord, and the four of them were alone.

Surreptitiously he felt for the stone Crowley had given him in his pocket. It was cool to the touch.

“You see, Gadreel?” Metatron said. “He actually broke him.”
The horsemaster’s mouth was pinched tight, as it so often was. “I see no evidence of that.”

“No evidence?” the king said incredulously. “Look at him! Saddle! Bit! Bridle!” He turned back to Dean and leaned forward with a manic gleam in his eye. “How’d you do it?”

Dean cleared his throat, stalling for time. “I asked nicely.”

“Come, come now, Dean.” He sat back up and smiled indulgently, somehow believing that despite the fact he’d sent fucking assassins after him and his brother, Dean would still buy the act. “We’re all friends here, aren’t we? Tell me how it happened, and knighthood is yours!”

“I asked him.”

Metatron’s face grew thunderous. “Think carefully and answer again.”

“It is unlikely there is another answer,” Gadreel said sharply. “Commander behaves for him when he does not behave for anyone else. If you tried to mount him he would throw you in an instant, I’d stake my career on it.”

“Good,” Metatron replied. “Because that’s exactly what’s at stake.” He kicked the stool out of the way and rose from the throne. “Dismount and give me my horse, Sir Dean.”

That was the last thing he wanted to do, but until he got a signal from the others, Dean had no choice but to play along. He dismounted, and holding the reins in his hand, he led Castiel closer to the dais. Metatron smirked and descended the small set of stairs. “Bring the stool, Gadreel.”

Though he glared at the king’s back, Gadreel did as he was told, picking up the stool and descending the dais after him.

“You’re not going to throw me, are you Commander?” Metatron asked, grabbing either side of the bit and forcing Castiel’s head down. It took everything in Dean not to react. “No,” the king said when he met no resistance, “you aren’t.” He let go and moved back, looking at Gadreel expectantly.

The small piece of furniture looked ridiculous in the horsemaster’s large hands, but dutifully he
stepped behind Dean and stooped to place the stool beneath the saddle. When it was settled Metatron shooed him away and used it first to get his left foot in the stirrup. Then, toes sinking into the stool’s red cushion, and draping both arms across Castiel’s back, the king heaved himself up and over. He moved obnoxiously in his seat, adjusting his robe and accidentally (or not) kicking Cas’s flank when trying to get his right foot into the other stirrup. Then he snapped his fingers at Dean, holding out his hand.

Reluctantly, he relinquished the reins, placing the black leather in the king’s open palm.

Metatron laughed. “Good boy, Commander!”

It was sickening, seeing Castiel standing still, bearing the source of all his pain upon his scarred back, his abuser nearby. Dean’s hands shook. There was only so much longer he could carry on like this, only so much longer could he watch his friend suffer. But then, in the very moment of his despair, he felt: a flash of heat against his thigh. The stone!

With the ability to act, Dean felt himself calm. “You know,” he said, loudly enough that it resonated in the room, “you keep calling that horse Commander. And here I thought his name was Castiel.”

All traces of glee dropped from Metatron’s face. “And to whom,” he asked with forced steadiness, “have you been talking?”

Dean smiled. “Lord Crowley.”

“Lord—” Gadreel’s eyes grew wide in shock, then his face hardened into loathing. “That man is poison!” He drew his sword and Dean hastily backed away, tripping on the dais and falling hard onto the steps.

Castiel whinnied and reared, tossing Metatron from his back. He shrieked as he flew through the air, and his crown went skidding across the room, clattering to a stop against the based of a column. But the prince paid him no heed and leapt in front of Gadreel before he could advance on Dean.

“You,” said Gadreel. “I tried to find pity in my heart for you. When Metatron told me the truth, that you had not been kidnapped, that Crowley had turned your loyalty against your own family and you fled as a horse to escape punishment, I thought to myself: he was still a child. He was easily led astray.”
Castiel tossed his head and stamped his front hooves in angry denial. “That’s not what happened!” said Dean, scrambling back to his feet.

Gadreel ignored him. “When you were finally brought back to us, after years of searching you were to be forced back into your human form and put on trial for treason.”

“But then,” he said, feinting a step closer. Cas backed him off by lowering his head and threatening to lunge. “But then when I told you of this plan you would not serve. You would not repent! I gave you every chance to make up for your wrongs but you remained prideful. It was clear that if you had the chance, you would again betray us all.”

When he reached with his sword again, it was no feint. But Castiel anticipated him, ramming forward head down. Dean’s heart caught in his throat, but the sword glanced off the chest plate with a resounding clang, and Gadreel was tossed to the side. He rolled with it and stood back up, advancing again. “And you did. You duped this innocent man into trusting you, and you led him straight to Crowley so he could poison him as well.” He raised his sword for another attack.

“WAIT!” Dean shouted, jumping down the steps to come at him from the side. Gadreel whipped around to point his blade toward him, and Dean just barely stopped from running himself through. He lifted his hands: no tricks. “Listen to me. What makes more sense, that a kid betrayed his own parents and lived as a horse for the next dozen years voluntarily, or that a dick with magic attacked a grieving prince and seized the throne for himself?”

“No,” said Gadreel. “Metatron confronted him about the betrayal, saw him turn into a horse and run away.”

“Are you listening to yourself? If he was in league with Lucifer, why is he still a horse?”

“Whatever Crowley told you—”
“Forget Crowley!” Dean yelled. “When Cas got here he was starved, and he was tortured, and he was whipped within an inch of his life! Who gave you the right?”

“The king!” They both glanced to the side; Metatron had fetched his crown, and was dusting it off with his cloak, apparently unbothered by the confrontation. “I was an Angel,” Gadreel continued. Dean sucked in a breath. “I fought alongside Michael and Hannah in the Final War. And when the choice came to serve a crown or lose my magic, I chose the latter. But what Charles did not tell me is that though I could not use it, my magic would still give me long life. So for millennia I had to wander, alone, hiding my longevity from the common people to protect the secret. Until Metatron found me. He needed someone who would understand what a mage, even a young one would be capable of. But most of all he needed someone who Castiel would not know, and who would not… know…” Gadreel stepped back one, twice. The hatred drained from him, leaving his face slack. “Someone who would not know the prince.”

“Oh, Gadreel,” Metatron pouted. He ambled toward them, the crown back on his head. “You’re not starting to believe his story, are you?”

The horsemaster lowered his sword, eyes darting between the three of them.

“Because what gives a story meaning, really? Truth, or belief? Is it true if it’s what he believes?” the king asked, gesturing at Dean. “If it’s what you believe? Or if it’s what they believe?”

The sword twitched in Gadreel’s hand. “Whom do you mean?”

“The people!” Metatron grinned and spread his hands, turning as if to encompass the whole city. “When Michael and Hannah died the people were frightened little sheep looking for someone to lead them. They didn’t care who was on the throne as long as the war ended and they could go about their lives again. So I gave them a story to believe in! A lost prince to give them hope, boohoo, and in the meantime I would be there as hope faded, quietly waiting. I laid the seeds for my future, letting loose an illness here or there so I could cure a few people, calling up a storm to wipe out a village and go comfort the survivors…Whenever they’ve needed me, I’ve been there. And I will continue to be here, because I am who the people want. I am who they choose.”

Gadreel yelled, lifting his sword, but Metatron was quicker: with a flick of his wrist Gadreel was thrown clear across the room against a marble column and crumpled to the floor, unmoving. Castiel charged next, but the king lifted his other hand and blew, and the prince clattered to a stop, armor and all. The stun powder. Then he turned to Dean as he went for him next. He didn’t even try to defend himself as Dean threw a punch, putting the entire weight of his body behind it.
The king’s head turned. Dean gritted his teeth, clutching his hand to his chest, but Metatron just rubbed his jaw and worked his mouth a little. Then he gave him a false hangdog look. “Is that all you’ve got?”

Dean flexed his hand, thankfully unbroken though still throbbing in pain. He hadn’t felt that particular pain in awhile, though it was as familiar to him as the sun in the morning and the moon at night. For years Dean had taken the lessons his parents had taught him, how to tuck his fingers, how to brace his shoulder, how to shift his weight to bring down another person. For years he’d protected himself and Sammy, protected Impala from bandits and would-be thieves. For years he had to prove himself in Horsetown, defending his promotion as a teenager and keeping the bullies off of Sam. And that’s all this was, wasn’t it? Just a bigger, meaner bully, who thought it was okay to murder people on a whim and watch them break as long as he got what he wanted in the end. Well, Dean had never stood for that, and he never would. Even if it killed him.

He lunged at Metatron, fists swinging. The king laughed as he blocked him, let him kick at his knee and stomp his instep, ram into his stomach and elbow his temple. When he went to jab his throat, Metatron grabbed his wrist and twisted.

“My turn,” he said.

Dean was able to block the first punch, but not the second. Pain exploded in his face, and when he blinked he realized he was lying on the ground.

“You see,” said Metatron, picking him up by the shirt with one hand. Dean struggled, and got a punch in the stomach for his troubles, doubling him over. “You see, Castiel, I told you this was going to happen.” Metatron went over to where Gadreel’s sword had fallen, dragging Dean with him. “I told you” —he stomped on Dean’s hand when he tried to grab for the blade— “that if you didn’t follow the script that I would kill this wriggling little maggot.” He dragged Dean back over to where Castiel was frozen and forced him to kneel. The magic had paralyzed the prince, but his eyes were moving and his breath was coming quickly. “But it’s too late now! Offer’s off the table. Any last words you want to say before I send him to the big pasture in the sky? No?”

Metatron swung the sword above Dean—the metal flashed in the light—then he brought it down, driving the blade into his gut.

There wasn’t much pain, really, until he pulled the sword out, dragging it through his insides. The blade was stained with blood, and when Dean looked down at the red blossoming on his shirt, he realized it was his.
Then Dean was on his back, staring at the arches in the ceiling so, so far away. He thought he heard Angel roaring…no…Castiel…but Cas was stunned. Maybe it was just the roaring in his ears.

He was supposed to be doing something.

Where was Sam?

He grew cold.

The roaring grew louder.

Then…

…nothing.

***

The spell was there, until it wasn’t.

The stun powder laid over its target like a cloak of iron, trapping you in bonds you couldn’t see. Castiel had fought against it, every time, but he’d never been strong enough. But now, in the moment he saw the sword leave Dean’s body, blood staining his shirt a greenish-gold, eyes wide in shock and fear, the bonds snapped. There was no way they could contain his rage and his anguish; his thoughts became his actions and he moved. He tossed his head and roared, the sound echoing around the room. Metatron stepped back, letting Dean’s body fall, and looked at him in surprise.

Then, Castiel felt himself growing. Pain seared down his back; muscles burned and bones crunched behind his shoulders. His skin rippled and stretched. The saddle creaked, straining, until the belt ripped apart and it dropped to the ground. Two ridges burst from either side of his spine, bony humps that shot up and then out, the hair shedding in clumps. Little black spikes poked out of his skin instead, then grew, spilling, lengthening: feathers, long, glossy black feathers. Wings.

Metatron was running now but Castiel had WINGS.
Roaring again, he launched into a gallop and leapt into the air. He soared in an arc around the room, circling Metatron so he didn’t have anywhere to turn.

“Why won’t you give up already?!” Metatron yelled. He reached into his robe and drew out a vial, throwing it hard as he could. “It’s over!”

But no, it wasn’t over, not until Metatron paid for what he did to the kingdom, to Castiel, even to Gadreel, but especially, especially for what he did to Dean. He roared once more, and the plates of his armor started to multiply. They changed and they shrank, becoming thousands of black and silver scales cascading over his expanding body. His neck grew long and claws sprouted from his hooves; he twisted in the air and thrashed in pain, whipping his tail around, which was solid and barbed. He flapped his wings and they struck the columns, the ceiling. Statues crumbled under his onslaught, the runner was ripped to shreds, and all he cared about were the three tiny figures were below him. Two motionless. The other moving, escaping to the corner.

Instinctively, Castiel drew a deep breath. His lungs billowed out and a tingling sensation raced down his throat. Dozens of times people had blown at him to gain control; now Castiel blew, and flame erupted from his throat. It seared his mouth and shot easily to the far wall of the throne room, catching all the tapestries on fire.

His way blocked, Metatron turned and spread his hands in appeal. “C-Castiel! I wasn’t actually going to kill you, you know, when I found you in Crowley’s study.”

Like lightning Cas lowered his head, snapping his sharp teeth mere feet away from Metatron. Smoke curled from his nostrils.

“I was just going to talk to you! Work out some kind of, some kind of regency situation until you came of age. It was Crowley who attacked first!”

*Dean!* Cas tried to say, *What about Dean?* But it only came out as an anguished rumble from deep in his chest. It crescendoed when he could not even communicate the way his heart was breaking. *I’ll kill you! I’ll make you burn!*

The vibrations shook the throne room, and marble dust sifted from the cracks he’d made in the columns. The hot air blew back Metatron’s robe and the crown slid partway off his curls. “Whether or not you like it the people love me! If you do anything to me they’ll ostracize you and then you’ll never become king!”
“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.” It was a deep woman’s voice, quite calm with just a hint of an edge.

Metatron peered over his shoulder, then relaxed. “Lady Billie! Thank the gods!”

So great had been Castiel’s growling that it had masked the opening of the doors. He tilted his enormous head, fixing a massive, slit-pupiled blue eye onto the newcomers. Not only was there Lady Billie, but also several knights and half the king’s guard. He did not want to go through them to get to Metatron, but he would do what he had to.

The small figure clad in her black Reaper’s cloak, however, did not rush to aid the king. “Once and for all, Your Majesty, I’d like to hear the real story.”

Metatron huffed in disbelief, but tried masking it with good humor. “Well, sure, but can story time wait until after the dragon is taken care of?” he said, somewhat sarcastically gesturing toward Cas as if he were presenting an exhibit.

Billie put her hands on her hips, pushing back her cloak and displaying her spells and weapons out in the open. “Indulge me.”

After a split second of thought, Metatron spread his arms and shrugged. “Sure! Why not? What would you like to hear?”

“Try the truth.”

“Billie.” He drew out her name as if he were admonishing an old friend, all you know better! “What really makes a story true? Is it—”

“The whole truth,” she interrupted him, “and your life will be spared.”

Castiel growled again, steam seeping out between his teeth.

The Reaper turned her gaze on him, entirely without fear. “Don’t you think that’s a fair trade? His
Who cared about the truth? He knew the truth, and Dean knew, and that’s all that mattered. Dean, lying cold on the marble floor, a green stone in his pocket. Dean, who was dead, who had given his life for him, but also for this. For the people to know the truth.

With an effort, Cas subsided, quelled the fire within him.

“Thank you,” said Billie. “Your Majesty?”

Stuck between a dragon and a hard place, Metatron clasped his hands together and gathered his thoughts. “Alright, fine. Have it your way. Sometimes the best stories are short and to the point. Yes, I tried to kill Castiel all those years ago. And I was planning to do it again, and now that you’ve forced it out of me in front of all these people, I’ll have to kill them as well. Oh! And you, too. Happy now?”

“Very,” said Billie, smiling grimly, and tossed a Stunner before he could blink.

He lifted a hand to deflect but it was too late. The glass vial shattered at his feet in a burst of blue-white light and he keeled over, unconscious. When he hit the ground the crown bounced off his head. The clank it made as it skipped across the marble was the only noise for a few seconds.

Castiel cautiously nudged Metatron with his snout. No reaction.

“You can stand down, Castiel.”

Cas blinked. Billie was giving him a look that was almost sympathetic. She’d called him by his name! She stepped over the king’s body and laid a hand between his nostrils, which were almost as tall as her. The leather of her glove protected her from the worst of the heat. “I don’t know how you did it, but everyone outside heard the whole thing. It’s over.”

*It’s over.*

For more than a decade, he’d been longing to hear those words. When it felt like there’d been no end
to his grief, the loss of his parents a constant pain at the core of him, all he’d wanted was for someone to say that it was over. When he was stumbling across the country, scared and alone, his own body taken from him, he’d wanted it to be over. When he’d been caught and locked in a stall, when people tried to ride him hours without end, when Gadreel whipped him and whipped him, he’d just wanted it all to be over. Over used to mean that it would turn out to have been, and he’d wake up to his mother’s embrace. It used to mean that he’d know his own body again, that he could live an honest life among other people. More recently, over used to mean that when Dean spoke to him, he could speak back. That he could hold him in his arms and at least say his name. Castiel had imagined it so many times, how Dean would smile to hear it, and know him, recognize him as his friend. And now that it was all he wanted, he couldn’t have it. Castiel’s dragon body was so large it took up half the chamber, and still it could not contain his agony. What torment it was to have lost the only man he ever loved, and for that man to never know how truly cherished he was!

He cried out, but no dragon with all the fire in the world could express such heartache. Castiel flapped his wings, writhing, and then his body began to shrink. His silver and black scales tinkled together as they squeezed in on him, and he diminished.

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When Castiel first opened his eyes as a man, he did not know what he was.

All he knew was that the world had suddenly burst into color. He ripped off his helmet so he could better see: the muted greens and blues he’d been living with for the past twelve years were not only newly vibrant, but there was pink and purple and there was red.

The first time he saw Dean in full color, he was covered in red.

Powerful wings cut through the air, and Castiel had barely landed on two feet before he was stumbling onto his knees, reaching for his friend. His shirt was completely soaked in blood, his hands were covered in it, and his chest was unmoving. His lips were a bluish purple, his eyes half-hooded and glassy. No more smiles, no more jokes. No more doting on Impala or looking out for Sam. No more strong hands with sure, gentle touches. No one to respond if someone were to call for him.

“Dean,” Castiel croaked. His voice was deep and scratchy, his throat burning from the fire, but now that he’d finally said it he couldn’t stop. “Dean, Dean, Dean.” It was the only word he ever wanted to say again. He grabbed Dean’s shoulder in one hand, cupped his face with the other—his hands!—and he was cold and lifeless to the touch. His wings arched high up; the long feathers cascaded down to the floor, shielding them from the room. “I love you,” he whispered, trembling. “I never needed you to love me too, it’s just that sometimes I don’t think you realize how many of the people around you really love you and I’m one of them. I love you, Dean.” Tears slipped down his face. “I love you. Dean, Dean, Dean.”
The pain of it, the energy the magic had ripped from his body was finally too much. Castiel collapsed onto Dean, weeping. The tears soaked into his shirt and mixed with the blood. He wept and wept, and so did not notice that before he finally fell into blissful unconsciousness, a breath stuttered in the chest beneath him.
Dean awoke to a slight, cool pressure on his stomach.

His eyelids fluttered. The ceiling his eyes were met with was white, with soft gold curls in abstract patterns. He lowered his eyes, blinked to adjust them, to see what was touching him.

It was a man.

The man was pale-skinned and dark-haired, a shadow of stubble on his cheek. His lips were pink and full, his cheekbones sharp. A scar in a thin line climbed up out of his collar and onto his neck. He was dressed in a plain shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and as Dean watched he dipped a cloth into a silver bowl, wrung it out, and applied it to Dean’s belly. It stung a little, now that he could focus on it more. When the man lifted the cloth again he saw a nasty, jagged red wound with tight stitches in black thread.

He remembered then. Metatron’s sword. Dean gasped, which drew out into a groan of pain at the movement it caused.

The man lifted his head at the noise, and oh. He was handsome, despite the disheveled hair and the tired look. And those eyes…blue and bright and undeniable. He would recognize them anywhere, smaller though they were, but it couldn’t be. Could it?

“Cas?” he tried.

Those eyes went wide in shock, then softened with an emotion Dean couldn’t read, as if the man were feeling a pain and joy at once. But he smiled, pulled Dean’s shirt back down, and set the cloth back in the bowl. “Dean,” he said. His voice was low and musical. He lifted Dean’s right hand, which was lying next to him on the bed, and kissed his knuckles in deference. His own hand was warm and calloused. “Hello.”

This was Castiel. At long last, this was the crown prince of Michaeretz.

“Hi,” Dean breathed.
They stared at each other for a while. There was so much that Dean had wanted to say to Cas once he was human again, so much he wanted to know, but now that the moment was here...he didn’t know what to say.

Castiel’s smile widened, then he ducked his head. Dean noticed for the first time that there was a large window in the side of the room with the panes thrown wide open. Sunlight streamed in, catching the silver circlet in Cas’s dark hair, and pulling a streak of rainbow from the perfectly round diamond in its middle and spilling it onto the white bedsheets. The jewel sat on the prince’s forehead exactly where his star had been as a horse. It was one thing to understand in the abstract, but this was Angel. And he was royalty.

“You must be thirsty,” said Castiel. He stood and stepped to a small table beside the bed, pouring him water from a pitcher. Then he sat at his shoulder. “I’m going to lift your head,” he told him. The crown prince gently cupped the back of his head, lifting it from the pillow, strong and sure. When he placed the glass to his lips Dean drank what he could, but he couldn’t concentrate on it for long. Without a grimace of disgust or a word of admonishment, Cas lowered his head, set down the glass, and dabbed at the extra drops with a napkin.

“Don’t,” grunted Dean.

Immediately Castiel pulled back. “Did I hurt you?”

Dean shook his head. “Don’t serve me. Shouldn’t serve me.”

The prince’s mouth quirked in a rueful smile. “Because of this?” he asked, touching a hand to his circlet.

Dean nodded.

“But you served me, Dean. When I was thirsty, you gave me water. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was hurt, you tended my wounds.” He turned the smile onto his hands, open and empty in his lap. “I would do all that you have done for me and more.”

“Don’t want...payment.”
“I don’t care for you out of some misguided sense of duty,” Cas replied. “I do it because you are my friend.”

Dean had no reply to that. A breeze blew in through the window, sending the thin white curtains billowing into the room. He didn’t know how to explain what he felt, that it was one thing to consider a horse a friend, and another to find out that friend was a person, and a prince. He just couldn’t be sure what was real, and what all had been in his head. How much of their interactions had he imagined, in the way that people put thoughts and emotions onto other creatures? And now that he was a royal mage returned to the castle, what could he need or want of Dean, who had no other plans but to go back to his loft and sleep in the straw?

Castiel must have seen some of the conflict on his face, for he nodded and looked away. “You must do as you feel is right,” he said. “But for my part, I—” He hunched his shoulders. Then he stood and walked to the end of the bed before facing him again. “I will be here, if ever you need me. For now, I will fetch Sam. He’s barely slept for worry.” He was almost out of the room, hand on the doorframe, before he turned back once more. “I would like to visit you again, perhaps after you’ve had more rest. May I?”

Dean found that though he did not understand much at the moment, he still wanted that. He needed to see the prince with his sad blue eyes at least one more time before he ascended the throne and he’d never be near him again. “Okay,” he said.

A small smile lit his face, and ducked his head again. “Okay,” he echoed, and strode from the room.

Dean must have slipped into a doze, for next thing he knew there were shouts coming down the hallway, and the unmistakable sound of horse’s hooves on a wooden floor. He opened his eyes and saw Sam grinning in the doorway, long hair messy like he’d just tumbled out of bed, and Baby’s nose sticking over his shoulder.

“Dean!” Sam cried, rushing in and flying to the bed, pulling him up into a big hug.

It felt so good to see his brother healthy and alive but, “Ow.”

“Sorry, sorry!”

After the requisite fluttering of hands and patting down to make sure he was in one piece, and fluffing up and stacking pillows so that Dean could sit up a little, Impala stepped forward and nosed
him gently. “Hey, Baby.”

“She’s been worried sick,” said Sam. “We all have, but it was worse for her. She hates the city so much but she wouldn’t leave the castle grounds. I’ve been taking care of her all I can. The staff don’t like that I let her in here sometimes. Though Cas is nice about it, made sure you had a room on the ground floor.”

Dean smiled and lifted a weak hand to stroke his horse’s face. “Ah, Baby, you didn’t have to do that. Not like I was dying or something.”

“Dean,” said Sam. His brother’s face was pinched with grief.

His heart started pounding. “What? What happened?”

“I’m not—I’m not completely sure what happened that day,” he said. “But you weren’t just dying, Dean. You were dead.”

“I’m a little tired for those kinds of jokes, Sammy.”

“I’m not joking, Dean,” he said sharply. “I saw you.” Angrily he wiped his eyes.

Dean swallowed. “Tell me.”

Sam took a deep breath to gather himself. “Okay, so Rowena, Crowley, and I had made it into the crowd. It got really big, just like Crowley said it would, so we spread apart and activated the spell on the stones. It worked. Everything that was said between you in the castle, half the city could hear.”

“Good,” said Dean. “Since I didn’t wake up in jail I figured…” He waved his hand.

“Yeah, Metatron’s the one in jail. Life sentence.”

“Better than he deserves,” he said. Then “Wait, does that mean Cas is king now?”
“No,” Sam said. He ran his fingers through his hair. “A lot’s been going on while you’ve been recovering.”

“From death,” he coughed. His throat had gone dry again.

Immediately Sam was up and on the other side of the bed, grabbing the pitcher and pouring Dean a glass of water. Impala nosed his face in concern, and Sam had to gently push her aside so Dean could drink.

When he was done, Sam set the glass down and picked up the thread. “It worked,” he repeated, “to a point. We heard everything Gadreel said, we heard Metatron threaten to kill you…and then the stones shorted out. Rowena thinks it’s because the burst of magic Castiel used was too powerful for it to withstand.”

“He broke out of the stun powder?”

Sam huffed a laugh. “He did more than that, apparently. He grew wings. And by the time I got there—gods, the crowd was staging a riot and they couldn’t keep us all out anymore, and I had to see you were alright—by the time I got there he was a dragon.”

Dean blinked, and blinked again. “A dragon?”

“Big and black and breathing fire,” said Sam, with no little wonder. “He had Metatron cornered. Billie stopped Cas from killing him, but Cas was just lost. He watched you die.” His voice broke on the last word. He took another breath. “He was twisting in the air like he was in pain, and then he got smaller and smaller…he was human again, but had wings, and then I saw you. I hadn’t been able to see you before, because he’d been so big and you were on his other side. I ran, but he got there first. He cried, and kept saying your name over and over again, kept saying—”

“What?” Dean whispered.

Sam shook his head. “You were dead, but I couldn’t get to you because his wings were blocking me. But I could see through them, a little, where they were spread. He was so far gone that he was crying onto your stomach. His tears were dripping and then…they started glowing. Bright white tears falling like rain and pooling together. Then there was a big flash of light, and he fell over, almost dead himself. He brought you back to life, Dean.”
“That’s impossible,” said Dean, holding Impala’s head close.

Instead of refuting it, Sam leaned forward and loosed the ties at the collar of his shirt. Gently, he tugged it down over Dean’s left shoulder. Impala lifted her head out of Dean’s grip to nose it, then turned her head and sneezed. His skin was no longer decorated with a splash of freckles. Now a raised pink scar in the shape of a handprint wrapped his shoulder. Cautiously he reached up his right hand to touch it. His fingertips tingled, though that could have been his imagination.

“Semantics,” he murmured.

“What?”

“Cas is powerful enough to be a god.”

Sam contemplated this for a moment. Then he resettled Dean’s shirt and redid the ties. “Cas is just Cas, Dean,” he said, and changed the subject.

***

The next time Dean saw either Sam or Cas, they came to visit him together (though sadly not with Impala, who apparently spent most of her time in the garden outside Crowley’s newly reinstated study). Dean had a sneaking suspicion that Sam had brought Cas along because he could sense Dean’s apprehension of him. And while it was true that Castiel didn’t look like some all-powerful being, he was still a prince, and somewhat unknown.

None of this seemed to bother Sam. As he spoke of all the changes that had happened since Metatron was deposed, and magic revealed to be common, he would tease Cas, nudge him, encourage him to pick up parts of the story. Many people were very angry about this lie that Michael had perpetuated for so long, that they wanted the royal line abolished all together. If there was no real divine right as expressed through magic, what gave them the right to rule at all?

But the story of Castiel having turned into a dragon had spread widely, and with enough witnesses to back it up—and Cas’s penchant for growing wings to fly to different parts of the region—many people had also concluded that that was enough evidence for kinghood in and of itself.
“There’s just so much to be done,” Cas said ruefully. “If there were a more expedient way, I would take it. I have not yet learned to appear and reappear as Reapers do.”

As for how to deal with people wanting to figure out if they had magic or not, and the old establishment still very much against it, a preliminary measure had been put in place: a handful of people had been found in the city, with the help of willing mages, whose magic was strong enough to be detected even without its having been used. They were offered spots at the royal university, where they could develop their skill and prove their abilities to the naysayers. “They accepted me,” said Sam. “And Kevin!”

“You deserve it,” said Cas.

Dean’s heart swelled with joy to see someone else recognize Sam’s worth.

As the days went on, and Dean gained energy, these visits with both Sam and Cas became more frequent. Sam chattered on about his studies, and Castiel spoke of the new royal council being formed, and of something called parliament. “I got it from the ancient texts, the few that survive from before the Final War,” he said. “Rowena helped me translate them.”

At Sam’s urging, he spoke also of looking at records of the charities his mother had started, and seeing that some of them were still thriving. “Others just need a little push,” he said, “and once a new government is in place, and a new monarch elected, maybe some can be eliminated altogether with new legislation.”

Better still Dean like the times when they didn’t speak of politics, or the destruction that Metatron had left behind. He would sit out in the garden when he could, keeping his Baby company, and Crowley when he was in his study. But always Sam and Cas would find time to come visit, sit in nice wicker chairs and enjoy the flowers, and the birds, and the fresh air. That’s when Cas grew nostalgic for being out in the countryside, and he would regale them with stories of his time as a horse, and not just at the stables, either.

“And then Rumsfeld said,” Cas told the Winchesters, of a time when the crotchety old stallion was putting another in his place, “you breed with the mouth of a goat.” Which in itself wasn’t amusing; what was hilarious was the disconcerted look he got on his face after the line got no reaction. “It was funnier as a horse,” he said earnestly, and Dean laughed so hard and long he had to spend the rest of the day in bed.

But even though he could be socially awkward, and he sometimes was clumsy when he forgot the shape of the body he was in, Dean couldn’t forget what Castiel was. Whenever he forgot, whenever
he caught himself thinking how kind he was, how handsome, how he genuinely seemed to care for Dean—all he had to do was touch the scar on his shoulder, and he remembered.

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The spring wore on, and in just a month they would celebrate the summer solstice with the Sky Festival. They celebrated it every year, but this year was to be special: the parliament had finally been put together, representatives from the farthest reaches of the country had finally been chosen and arrived at the capital, and their first declaration was that a new monarch was to be crowned as the festival’s main event. The nobles argued about it over their lavish dinners, and the commoners debated it across the land, whether they were loading crates on the brisk northern docks or cozy and drunk on Ellen Harvelle’s special brew. Parliament received letters and messages from the people, urging them to cast their vote for this person, or that.

Crowley stayed on top of it pretty avidly. “Your name has been kicked around, you know,” he told Dean one day as they shared a whiskey in the garden against healer’s orders.

“Bullshit,” said Dean.

“So has your moose of a brother,” he insisted. “Face it, squirrel, there are very few people well known enough in this country to garner enough votes for the crown, and most of those are already connected to the royal house in some way. Commoners want a champion, too.”

But even Dean, in his quiet corner of the castle, could tell that it was likely Castiel would become king regardless. He was more, now, than just the beloved young prince which Mt. Heaven doted on. He was more, too, than the increasingly ludicrous stories that had sprung up about his powers and his shapeshifting ability (though his most truly impressive feat, bringing Dean back to life, had thankfully not spread beyond their small circle). Castiel was now also his mother’s son, going wherever he felt he was needed most. This was throughout the capital, yes, but also to the towns and villages across the country where Metatron had admitted to sending storms or sickness.

The cynical called it campaigning.

“It’s not campaigning,” Cas told him wearily one evening, having flown straight into his open window. The gust of wind his wings blew in doused the candles and knocked over a chair. Cas had spent the next few minutes apologizing profusely as Dean laughed and struck some matches. “I would do it whether or not I was a prince, or looking to be more. What happened with Metatron is the fault of my family, and it’s my responsibility to help where I can.”
Dean could see that he truly believed that. He almost lifted a hand to comfort him, but stopped himself at the last moment. “It’s not your fault, Cas. How could it be?”

“Nevertheless.”

Castiel ignored his critics and kept up his trips, flying farther and farther out from Mt. Heaven as he grew more comfortable with his wings. Dean found himself staring out his window in the evenings more than not—it was the ground floor of the castle, but still at the top of the butte—scanning the horizon, and holding his breath every time a bird soared in the distance. He’d get grumpy the longer Cas was absent, snapping at Sam when he hadn’t meant to do so at all.

“Okay, Dean,” Sam usually said, not bothered. Which just pissed Dean off more, because what the hell was he smiling about?

***

It was ten days from the festival and Castiel had been gone for a week, something about bandits in the south, hiding in the Eastern Marshes. The healer came to check on him in the morning as she always did, asking Dean to lift his shirt so she could examine his wound. The gash had completely healed, stitches long since taken out, and was now an ugly scar he would bear the rest of his life. She palpated it and asked if it was still sore. It wasn’t.

“A bit,” Dean said.

“A couple more days, then,” she answered, smiling.

Dean nodded. He hoped it was enough. It was crude of him to draw out his time in the castle, stretch the hospitality, but he needed to hold on. He had to see Castiel one last time. There was always a chance he wouldn’t win the vote, but that chance was slim. Castiel was amazing, and generous, and strong, and everyone who met him could see it.

All Dean wanted now was to say goodbye.

That evening he kept vigil, as he did every night, leaning out the window with his elbows on the low
sill. He watched the sun set—he could just see the ridge of the Micharim Mountains at this height—and the sky faded from orange, to pink, to purple. The noise from the city below lessened, and Dean could hear the crickets out in the garden which wasn’t too far from where his room was tucked in an out of the way corner of the castle. The stars flickered into being the darker it grew, and idly he tried to pick out the constellations his father had once told him about, horses and hunters from Michaeretzer legends. Bats flit here and there, but their movement wasn’t right for Cas’s great gliding wings, and he wasn’t fooled by them.

It wasn’t until the moon was halfway across the sky when he saw a large bird wheel around the side of the butte, wings outstretched. Dean held his breath. It could be a hawk, but maybe—?

Sure enough, the bird grew, and kept growing. Castiel had come home at long last.

Dean hurried away from the window, double checked that candles were lit so Cas would know he was still awake, and sat on his bed, hands twisting in his lap.

In another moment, he could hear wingbeats, the familiar fwoom fwoom fwoom as Cas slowed down and dropped from a height. He landed softly on his toes on the windowsill, hands braced on the frame, making the curtains flap like banners before settling again. Lightly Cas stepped inside and shuddered; his wings folded in on themselves and disappeared.

“Heya, Cas,” said Dean.

“Hello,” he answered, voice rough. He plopped on the edge of the bed next to him. “It is so good to see you, Dean.”

Dean gave him a small smile. “Rough one?”

“Yes,” he said gravely. “I did not like being away so long, but it was necessary. We can discuss it later. How are you feeling?”

Trust Cas to unwittingly bumble into the one thing Dean didn’t want to talk about. But maybe it was better to get it over with now. He could even leave before the morning dawned, and be back in Horsetown in time for the early chores. “I’m healed now. I’m good.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Cas smiled. “Maybe you could come with me on my next trip. I mean, if
you would like.”

Dean traced his face in the moonlight, the windswept hair, the strong nose, those beautiful eyes. He ached. “I can’t.”

The prince turned his head and looked at him from the side, like he sometimes did when he forgot he wasn’t still a horse. “Why not?”

“Because I have to leave.”

Cas sucked in a breath. “Oh,” he said. His fists clenched, curling into the bedsheets. “You don’t want to stay.”

“Of course I want to stay,” said Dean. “But I can’t. It hurts too much.”

Cas looked at his stomach.

“No,” Dean whispered. “Here.” He pressed a hand to his chest.

His eyes widened in shock and his mouth twisted in horror. “What have I done?” he pleaded. “The last thing I would ever wish you is harm. Tell me what I have done so that I may fix it.”

“Cas, no!” Dean grabbed his hand. “You haven’t done anything wrong. You’re perfect, and that’s the problem. You’re noble, and powerful, and handsome and you belong in this castle, and I’m just a groom, you know, a stable boy really. I don’t have the smarts like Sam, I’m going to be mucking stalls all my life and sleeping in a barn just like—”

“An animal?” Castiel asked.

Dean bit his lip and looked down.

Cas pulled Dean’s hand toward him so he could cradle it in both of his own. “I don’t think we’re so different. I look at you and I see beauty, and nobility. I see someone else who was orphaned in the
Border War, and understands that grief. I see someone who knows horses better than anyone I’ve ever met, which is good because sometimes I’m a horse. But most of all I see a man who is kind, and generous, and loyal to his friends. I see…” He trailed off, and Dean looked up into his gaze, scared but earnest. “Dean, I see the man I love.”

“Cas, Cas,” said Dean, holding back tears. “That can’t be true.”

“It is,” he answered. “I love you so much. May I show you?”

Dean nodded, unable to speak. He let Cas cup his face, and when he pressed their lips together he didn’t close his eyes, not wanting to miss a moment. The kiss was gentle, so gentle. But it did not last long. Cas pulled back and his eyes fluttered open, questioning.

“More,” Dean breathed. “Show me more.”

And he did.

***

It was well into the morning before Dean woke. The sun slanted fully into the room, the city bustled below them, and a single bee buzzed in through the window. Dean was draped half over Castiel’s back, using his shoulder as a pillow, and he watched as it flew in lazy circles around the room, before decided more flowers could be had outside.

Dean stretched a little, dragging his left arm back to his side, fingers bumping along Cas’s scars. He rubbed his eyes open properly and frowned down at them. They looked worse, much worse than they had the night before. There were some thin ones, white and completely smooth, but others were raised and red, still angry looking after all these months. He rested his forehead on Cas’s back; that night when he’d found Angel whipped half to death in his stall was horrifying enough, but knowing that it had been a man, that it had been this man whom he’d grown to love…He started kissing them, soft pecks and caresses, pouring his love into the evidence of Castiel’s pain.

Cas stirred. “Dean?” he murmured.

Suddenly Dean couldn’t wait another second. He tugged lightly on Cas’s bicep, who obligingly turned over. Though he was mostly asleep still, his face lit up when he saw Dean, fully happy and
“I love you, too,” Dean said.

Cas snapped awake in an instant. He laughed and pulled Dean down on top of him, and they kissed, and kissed.

When the initial rush petered out, and they were each lying on their sides, kissing intermittently between smiles, Cas reached up and traced the handprint on Dean’s shoulder.

“So I don’t scare you?” he asked quietly. “Sam thought I might.”

“I was scared at first,” Dean admitted. “But I don’t remember it. Mostly it’s just been the whole…king thing.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Cas said. “If they offer it to me, I don’t think I’ll accept.”

Dean sat up onto his elbow. “What? Why?”

Castiel mirrored him. “All of this mess happened in the first place—not just Metatron but the Border War too, all of it was because of the decisions my father made. Though I would try to be better, I am still his son. Won’t it be more of the same? Won’t it send the wrong message?”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“And I don’t even want it, Dean.” He ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up even more. “Maybe there was a time in my childhood that I wanted to do it, when I thought it was my right, but I can’t even remember what that feels like. For months now I’ll I’ve wanted is to have a simple life, my own life, and trust me, I would rather be mucking stalls with you by far, than living like a king without you.”

Dean kissed him, if only to smooth his brow and to calm his upset. “Wait here,” he said. He slipped out of bed and knelt next to his pack sitting unobtrusively in the corner. Sam had brought it for him, knowing they both slept better when all their most prized belongings were ready to pick up at a
moment’s notice. He dug into a small, secret pocket and held the object he found there in his fist. When he turned around he saw Cas lying stretched out on the bed, propped up on his elbows to watch Dean, open and unashamed in the light of day. Dean grinned. Starting from the foot of the bed, he crawled over Castiel until he was sitting on his lap. “For you,” he said, and held up the double crown.

Castiel gasped. He grabbed it and sat up; Dean let him and instead pressed against his side, tucking his chin over his shoulder. “Where did you get this? I thought they’d all been melted?”

“Bobby gave it to me, a long time ago, as a sign of faith,” Dean said. “I’ve never forgotten it. He said she used to do some pretty great things, back in the day. I want you to have it.”

“Oh Dean, I can’t. It was a gift.” Dean could see how it killed Cas to say it. Even now he was tracing his thumb over the double profile, back and forth.

“Yeah, and now I’m gifting it to you. Because Michael wasn’t your only parent, and maybe if the people want you to be king, it’s not him they’re thinking of, huh?”

“Thank you,” Castiel said. “But the crown will still mean nothing to me if it scares you away.”

“Don’t you get it, yet?” Dean said, ducking under Cas’s arm, who embraced him without thought. He sighed and closed his eyes, perfectly willing to stay in bed for the rest of the day. He thought they deserved that. “I’d rather have you, king or not.”
Two days before the Sky Festival, Crowley went looking for Castiel. It was well known around the castle and the court that he and his erstwhile stable boy and fallen in love and could be found in each other’s company more often than not. But Lord Crowley had it by report that Dean was off gallivanting with his beast of a horse and Sam, another common companion of the prince, was attending a lecture at the university. He would not be away on one of his trips so close to parliament’s vote, so Crowley walked up and down the halls of the castle for his former pupil.

He finally found him in a little used sitting room. It was mostly decorated in dark wood and a thick green carpet, and windows that looked out onto the courtyard and further in the distance, Horsetown. But Castiel was not looking south. He was looking north, where two tall paintings dominated the wall. On the left was Queen Hannah in three quarters profile, dark hair swept up in an elegant style and wearing a blue dress to bring out her eyes. In the right painting was also Queen Hannah in three quarters profile, but in her masculine body, short dark hair and dark eyes and a lovely blue doublet fitting her station.

“The vote is tomorrow,” Crowley said. Castiel didn’t turn. “I’m sure you realize that you’re going to win, but just in case I thought it prudent to warn you.”

Castiel took a deep breath in and out. “You lied,” he said.

“What did I lie about, Your Highness?” He was one of the few people who called him by that title these days, and it made those broad shoulders twitch. But Crowley figured the boy needed to get used to honorifics again. “You’ll have to narrow it down.”

He turned, finally. “About what happened when Metatron attacked us in your study. You implied to your mother and the Winchesters that the only reason I wasn’t killed by the onslaught of magery and witchcraft was because of my shields. You didn’t tell them that it was because you took the worst of the spells onto yourself, the ones for pain and torment.”

Ah. Crowley hadn’t known how much of it Castiel remembered. “Metatron was never in a demon camp,” he said. “He’s never known how to really inflict pain.”

Castiel gave him that side-eyed look he’d come to favor. He’d recognized the answer for the deflection it was—he might make a good politician yet. The prince came to a decision and nodded. “Thank you,” he said.
Some thanks! Will wonders never cease? Neither as a little boy nor as a teenager had Castiel been prone to gratefulness. Then again there was not much of the boy left in him; only the man.

When he was not dismissed, Crowley entered the room and joined Castiel at a respectful distance. They looked together at the portraits.

“How am I supposed to do it?” Castiel asked at length. “How am I supposed to live up to her legacy?”

Interesting. Crowley clasped his hands behind his back, settling into his old teaching stance. “What do you perceive to be her legacy?”

“Good works. Generosity. Kindness. She made the time and effort to understand her subjects, and she made their lives better.” He put a hand in his pocket and pulled out a coin, turning it over and over.

Crowley recognized the double crown. “When you get to be my age,” he told the prince, “you will find yourself in constant battle against people with short memories.”

He looked up from the coin. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that for most of her life, Hannah was as cold and detached as Michael. Why do you think they got along so well?”

Castiel shook his head, confused. “None of my memories of her are cold.”

“Of course not. You’re what changed. Or maybe that’s not completely fair,” Crowley acknowledged. “Clearly there was a decision to have a child in the first place. But when you’re effectively immortal, the lives of normal people seem so short and far away, as lovely as they might be. So you begin to think of them as you might a dog. Or an insect. The ex-Archangels, the few remaining Angels, even my mother, some of the time, forget that they’re exactly the same as the rest.

“And then, you. A bouncing little blue-eyed baby. She felt tremendous pain when she gave birth, and tremendous joy when she held you. One day she was ice, and the next day she melted back into
a human being. When she left the castle she recognized you in the arms of other parents, and soon she began to recognize herself.

“Did you know,” Crowley continued, “that she rarely ever became a man until after you were born?”

Castiel swallowed, clutching the coin to his chest. “No.”

“It’s true. The older you grew, the more she left the castle. She interacted with more people and discovered that though their lives were short, they still knew things she never knew, and experienced things she’d never done. I don’t know when first she learned what it was to be a man; either she was always that way, or it happened long before I was born. But I do know it’s not easy, being of two worlds.” He sketched a small bow to Castiel in acknowledgment. “But their courage made her find courage in herself. I don’t know what the king thought of it, but by the time you were a tyke she was a man as often as she was a woman.”

“How do you know?”

“I was already your tutor at the time,” Crowley said. “I was there when she commissioned the portraits. As for that coin,” he added, nodding at it, “Michael commissioned those, but mostly, I think because it’s such a great display of power. But maybe not.” He shrugged. “Whatever the reason, though it wasn’t as flashy, Hannah was the more powerful mage, in the end. Michael may have commanded the storms, but Hannah served the people and was a true queen.”

“Because of her magery? Her good works?”

“Have I been nattering on to myself? Haven’t you been listening?” Crowley snapped. “Because of her love for you. She knew to be the best mother she could be she had to be the best version of herself, and that version was both a man and a woman, who dared to step outside her bounds and help who needed helping, and did what needed doing.”

Castiel frowned, grief and disbelief warring within him. “You give me too much credit. I was just a child.”

“You give yourself too little,” he rejoined. “Or didn’t you know that it was for love of you that you’re even alive today?” Crowley cut himself off, before he said too much.
But Castiel understood. “You recognized these changes in my mother…because you felt them in yourself. Crowley—”

“For love of you, a foolish pauper with a heart of gold and his makeshift family risked everything and now here we are.”

Castiel sighed, but allowed the deflection. “Dean’s love for me got him killed.”

“And your love for him brought him back. Or what else do you think broke the spell?”

“I beat Metatron.”

“No. In those moments, you were selfless. You proved you knew what it means to serve. You earned the crown Metatron wanted so badly. That is what turned you human again.”

Castiel stared at the space between the portraits, unseeing. “And the resurrection?”

“Well,” Crowley shrugged. “You and Dean do share a profound bond.” When this statement was greeted with nothing but hunched shoulders, Crowley stepped a little closer. “Do you want my advice, little prince?”

Castiel nodded, looking almost as lost as the boy he once was when Crowley called him that all the time.

“Don’t push it away. You’ll need his love to see you through, and the love of your friends. Using those wings isn’t enough to see you through it, little bird. You will have your own reckoning as a child of two worlds. And so will Dean.”

“He is no mage.”

“No indeed. But he, too, is a child of two worlds. However briefly, he was a resident of the land of the dead before he returned to the land of the living. Will you abandon him?”
“Never,” he said fiercely.

“Good. In my experience, journeys get darker before they get light again.”

They contemplated this for a while. Sunlight moved across the wall, framing Hannah’s two faces, equally strong and beautiful.

“And you?” the prince asked.

“What about me?”

“Will you remain my friend, and support me as your king?”

Crowley bowed. “I’ll see you at the coronation in two days time, Your Highness.”

He left the prince to his thoughts.
Coronation

The day of the solstice came. In the east the sun rose strong and gave its life-giving heat to the land; in the west a storm brewed, thunderheads galloping behemoths in the sky pulling gray curtains of rain beneath them. For a Michaeretzer, child of the plains, this double weather during the Sky Festival was a good omen.

The citizens remarked especially that it showed well for Prince Castiel, whom the day before the parliament had voted the new king. The first half of the day would be sunny, a reflection of his warmth, his kindness, and the love he had for his people. When the storms rolled in later, they would reflect his strength, his power, his winged wrath against those who would harm his people, the dark aspect of his love. Both of these were good qualities in a leader, they felt, and most were confident of his ascension to the throne.

Though the first part of the Sky Festival was usually held in the castle so as to be as close to the heavens as one could be in the entirety of Michaeretz, Castiel had asked that it be moved to outside of Horsetown, so that all who wished to be present were able. Since no one wanted to miss the coronation, only the most curmudgeonly of the people complained about tradition.

Also at the prince’s behest, a great many horses joined the celebration. They were resplendent in ribbons and garlands of blue and purple, and as they leapt and danced with their trick riders leaping and dancing too, their bells jingled in a great cacophony of pouring rain. Musicians with drums of all shapes and sizes joined them, pounding rolls of thunder into their instruments, a rumbling crescendo as people danced and clapped with joy—and than softer, less continuous. The storm moving on. The horses stilled, one by one, the rain stopping and the clouds clearing up. And then suddenly, between all the cool colors of the sky, a giant horse galloped out, she and her rider dressed completely in yellows and golds. It was Dean Winchester and his beloved Impala, who this year was honored with the role of the sun. He stood on her back, arms outstretched, banners of fabric streaming out behind him. With incredible precision and skill, the mare twisted her body in a tight circle, all their ribbons swirling in a sphere of brightness and life.

This part of the ceremony over, the coronation began.

First came the newly elected parliament, dressed in the finest clothing of their regions: nobles from Mt. Heaven, magnificent in their silks; the sailors from the north in blue jackets and shiny silver buttons, curved swords in their belts; the navigators of the bayou in the southern marshes, with their jaunty low-slung caps; the people who made the Micharim their home, with puffy white sleeves and brocades of mountain flowers; and all the peoples of the plains, whether from farming communities, hunters along the edge of the Greenwood, and there was even one man, dressed in horse leather, representing the nomadic people from the heart of the land.
Then came Castiel. Everyone pressed closer to see him. He wore not the fine fabrics of the nobles, but his spectacular black and silver armor which, they said, had been made for a horse. His wings were out today, massive and startling and shimmering inky black in the sun. Some declared that this must have been what Michael was like, when he walked among his people. Others knew better, and rejoiced to see Queen Hannah’s influence in the way he smiled at the children who threw him flowers.

There had been some discussion, before parliament made their vote, about who would be given the honor of crowning the king. When they brought the issue to Castiel, it is said he could think of no honor greater than being surrounded by the friends who helped him in his time of need. And so behind him marched Sam Winchester, tall and proud in the garb of his region, plain pants and simple mail, a longbow slung over his shoulder. With him was Robert Singer, Royal Stablemaster under King Metatron and his second, Rufus Turner. There was the farrier, Benjamin Lafitte, wearing the same cap as the others hailing from his region; following them were a slew of young stable boys and girls, scrubbed within an inch of their lives. Behind them was the Lord Crowley and his mother Rowena who, rumor had it, was a real witch. They were dressed the finest of all the revenue, in purples and blacks. Bringing up the rear was Dean Winchester, who had hastily changed from his sun costume. He and his mare wore specially commissioned armor with the new crest of the king: a pegasus and a unicorn facing each other, rampant. When the crest was plastered up around the festival grounds the people had known at once the pegasus stood for the king, but it wasn’t until now they understood the unicorn: Impala’s chanfron bore a horn, wicked and sharp.
Castiel climbed the dais built just for that purpose, and after some words from a few members of parliament, Crowley lifted the crown from its special chest, and placed it upon Castiel’s head.

The crowd roared its approval.

The new king let it continue for awhile, but then raised a hand for silence. In his other he held a green stone. When he spoke, his voice seemed to come from the land itself, stretching all across the crowd, deep and resonant as thunder.

“Thank you for entrusting me with our country,” he began. More applause. “I know that my father’s rule was built on lies, and a lack of concern for the everyday lives of our people. Today I wish to take this sign of faith you have given me, and demonstrate how I intend to wield this great burden.

“Dean Winchester, please step forward.”
Surprise and nervousness were clear in the lines of his body, but dutifully the groom stepped forward, and bowed.

“Tradition in this country has been that only people of noble birth are allowed to train for knighthood. Why, when every one of you could prove worthy? From this day forward, a knight may choose to sponsor any Michaeretzer, from any walk of life, and train him or her for the rank of knighthood. Dean, more than anyone I’ve ever met you have shone the strength, the skill, the bravery, but most importantly the empathy it takes to protect people and care for the horse that is your partner. I will dub you a knight now, if you so wish it.”

“Your—Your Majesty,” said Dean. His voice, too, was audible to everyone. “It wouldn’t be fair if you just gave me the rank, when everyone else had to work for it.”

The king chuckled. “Of course, I should have expected your sense of fairness, another fine quality, to make you hesitate. Very well. Who among you knights would sponsor Dean Winchester?”
Not just a knight, but a Reaper stepped out of the crowd. “I will,” said the Lady Billie.

“So be it. Dean of Winchester, I dub thee squire.”

Dean bowed again, and stepped back.

“But fairness should not just be discussed when it comes to rewards,” the king continued. “It must also be present when discussing punishment. Bring forth Horsemaster Gadreel.”

Guards came forward, escorting the ex-horsemaster onto the dais. The crowd murmured in dismay and excitement; parliament had been unable to come to an agreement about what to do with him, since he had placed his trust in the false king as so many of them had, but he still carried out crimes in his name, had given the king his scars, which he never hid, but wore proudly.

Instead of bowing, Gadreel knelt at the king’s feet.

“And what would you find a fair punishment, Horsemaster Gadreel?”

“You Majesty, it is you who I have wronged more than any other. I will accept whatever punishment you deem fit, even if it is to take my life.”

Some members of the crowd jeered at this statement; an execution would only be what he deserved!

“I have no desire for your life,” said the king. “Nor to whip you, one harm exchanged for another. But I wonder, would you accept a form of penance?”

To the crowd’s astonishment, Gadreel looked up at the king with something like joy. “Your Majesty, I would welcome it with open heart.”

“Then you may return to the stables, under one condition: you will be lower than the lowest stable boy, with no chance for advancement. You will serve the horses whom you once thought were only good to serve you, until such time as your soul feels the penance is done.”
“Thank you, Your Majesty,” he said, entirely sincere.

“You are most welcome. Unchain this man,” the king commanded.

And thus it was that the new king began his reign with love for both an enemy and a friend, and the people who looked on, his people, felt something returned to them that had been broken since the Border War: trust.

Trust, and hope.
Today is a good day.

Battle is on the horizon; Impala can smell it. The wind is from the south and carries with it a slight stink of sulfur, the signature of Lucifer’s magicians. They are practicing, preparing for war. It will be soon, Impala thinks. A few months, as humans reckon it. The moon will wax and wane several times, no doubt, so King Castiel has time. She would tell him her thoughts if she could, but thankfully her Dean knows.

“Smell something, Baby?” he asks her. He’s in full armor today and is mindful when he strokes her neck.

Impala gives a small toss of the head to the south, flaring her nostrils.

“Yeah,” Dean says. “I know what you mean.” Even though she can’t fully see him where he sits on her back, Impala can still feel the unease in his posture. It’s not due to the heaviness of the armor - he was used to it, after over a year of training as a knight in earnest - but in this moment, like any horse with her rider good and true, they are one. They dread and anticipate the onslaught equally, and worry for their family. They know their duty is to be both the first and last line of defense for the country and its citizens, and its king. They stand tall under the weight of this great responsibility because they have chosen it.

They have chosen each other.

Dean sighs and releases the tension. “Come on,” he says, with the barest squeeze of his legs, the lightest flick of the reins. Dean only ever suggests to her, and that’s one of the many things she likes about him. Of course, she wouldn’t deign to be bridled or ridden by just anyone.

Impala turns toward home. The sun sets behind them as she trots back to the stables, their shadow long in front of them on the grass. Mount Heaven looms dark and massive above the plains, fires large and small flickering in windows and guttering over the streets. The sun reflects off the glass in jeweled shades of pink and purple. The Royal Stables themselves lay dim and silent at its feet, lit only by a single beam of light spilling from its partially open door. As they come closer a figure steps into the opening, silhouetted by the lanterns inside. It is not Dean’s squire Claire who awaits them at this late hour, nor Bobby, nor even Sam.
“Cas,” Dean breathes, though of course Impala can hear him. She can also feel how impossibly lighter he grows, like the mere thought of his beloved could carry him with the wind.

She stops a little sooner than she usually might for Dean to dismount, and as expected he leaps from her back the moment he can. Dean removes his helm as he walks up to Castiel, who patiently waits with his arm braced above his head on the doorframe. He wears no crown today, nor fine fabrics, nor glinting gold. Instead he wears simple brown trousers and a loose white shirt with the laces untied, so that it billows slightly in the breeze. The collar gapes so that the tail end of a red scar is visible where it curls from his shoulder onto his neck; the whip wound coupled with his bare feet and tousled head might place him more easily among the peasants than royalty. But his smile is bright as his lover draws near. For all his knightly accoutrement Dean embraces the king with gentleness, and Castiel cups the back of his husband’s head with more command and protectiveness than the helmet caught between them. They are equals where their lips meet.

“What are you doing here?” Dean asks when they break apart.

Castiel affects an innocent look. “Who, me? I’m just the new hire.” Both Impala and Dean snort. Castiel’s expression melts into fondness. “I sent Claire and all the hands to get their dinner. Someone was keeping them waiting. And maybe,” he adds, “the king wished to see the prince consort.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

Impala rejoices in the happiness of Castiel and her Dean, but it truly has been a long day and now that she is just outside the warmth of the stables and its abundance of food, she doesn’t have the patience for the way they sometimes stare. She nudges Dean’s shoulder.

He startles. “Sorry, Baby, let’s get you inside.”

Castiel opens the stable door wide enough for Impala and Dean to walk in abreast of each other. Dean sets his helm aside and unstraps his weaponry as she ambles over to the grooming station. Castiel shuts and secures the stable door and helps Dean finish removing his gauntlets, setting them next to the helmet on the table there for just such a purpose. But Dean waves him away before he can start on the rest of his personal armor. “I have to take care of Baby first.”
“Of course. May I help?”

Dean grins. “Not me you have to ask.”

The king smiles and steps up to Impala, respectfully bowing his head. “Impala, may I have the honor of serving you?”

This is what makes Castiel a rare man. From nobleman to peasant, humans are wont to give nicknames to their horses, though often teasingly, even facetiously, like saying, “Okay, princess” when a mare dares to ask for a little more. They might make a grand bow to wave a stallion into his stall, or doff a cap when passing by as if they were greeting a gentleman on the street, and then laugh as if it were some great jest. Not so, Castiel. He carries the pride of a horse with him, and respects them as the noble species they are. He has not let his hard won humanity erase what he learned when living at Impala’s side. He does not take for granted what a horse does to serve men.

He speaks her given name with the grace of his office, and he does not jest.

Impala nudges his cheek with her nose, granting permission. “Thank you,” Castiel murmurs, stroking her nose once before starting to unbuckle the bridle.

Dean runs his hand along her side and hums as he makes short work of her saddle. If he hadn’t been wearing half his armor that day, she would not have had to wear all the tack that normal men require when riding, but she understands. Her Dean wishes to be prepared, and so does she. And he always takes good care of her after. Castiel anticipated the thorough grooming and has a tub full of water ready. She nickers softly in thanks as they each take up a cloth to wipe her down. Even more than the feeling of sweat and grime being lifted away she enjoys the kindness she feels in Castiel’s hands, and the ever-present tenderness in her Dean’s.

The three of them are silent for awhile. The water splashes as they wring out their cloths and dip them in the tub for clean water, and Dean hums a tune under his breath. It isn’t until they move on to brushing, the gentle scrape against her hide only slightly louder than the soft snorts and stamps coming from farther in the stables, when Castiel speaks. “All week you’ve been coming in late,” he says.

Dean pauses in his brushing. “It’s stupid,” he mutters. Impala flicks the muscle under his hands to remind him he can brush and speak at once. He resumes.

“It’s just a feeling.”

“What does it feel like?”

Dean goes through several brushstrokes before answering. “Like we need to be ready.”

Impala huffs a little blow in agreement.

“The news from abroad hasn’t changed significantly.”

“From your spies, you mean.”

“From my ambassadors, Dean, of course.”

“Of course, husband, that’s why I leave the politics to you.”

Impala can hear their smiles, and feel the happiness that bubbles between them despite the future that looms ahead. When their humor subsides, Castiel continues, “I trust your instincts, beloved. What can I do to help you and the other knights?”

“If you mean in equipment or recruitment we have that well in hand. But Lucifer will have more than knights.”

“Yes, and the years under Metatron have put us well behind in magical development. And Raphael will look to her own borders first, and will not share her secrets.”

“Sammy’s working on the magic, at least.”

“Rowena and Crowley might be helping a little, too,” Castiel says wryly. “But that is not enough,
not if we want to avoid the same horrors as the last war.”

“What are you hinting at?”

“I’m thinking about sending a delegation to Gabriel’s court.”

Dean stops brushing again. Impala turns her ear toward Castiel in interest. “No one knows where his court even is.”

“More than one delegation, then, to cover more of the country at the same time.”

“He’ll turn them away at the door. Or kill them where they stand.”

“I don’t believe he will. His people guard the borders ferociously, yes, but our people who trade with them along the border are not without insight.”

“Yeah, and his people don’t go home without gossip. He knew what was going on in the last war and didn’t do shit. He let your parents die, and mine, too. He’d rather let us rot than lift a finger.”

“You’re right. He didn’t do shit. But he’s also old, centuries older than us.”

“So?”

“So maybe he’s lived long enough to have regrets.”

“You’re being too forgiving, Cas.”

“I’ve thought of that.”

“Have you?”
“Yes.”

“And?”

The brushing done, the men go together to hang the brushes on the wall pegs. Impala watches as they turn to face each other at the same time.

“And the last living cousin I have cursed me, tortured me, and now sits in the dungeons. One of my uncles is slowly building an army to challenge the entire continent, and my aunt is being so reserved in her diplomacy it makes me suspect she might be just as willing to ally herself with Lucifer, if it means she can wrest half the kingdom from my rule, which she considers weak. My parents had perhaps more of a role in orchestrating the last war than previously thought, while every single one of them perpetuates the lie my grandfather wrought. Are all the apples on my family tree so rotten?”

The dancing flame in the closest lantern casts a pulsing halo over the king’s head. Dean studies his lover in that light and Impala waits to hear his opinion. “You think Gabriel cut himself off from the tree because of it.”

“Exactly,” says Castiel.

Dean pulls him in by the shoulders and rests their foreheads together. “That’s a hell of a gamble, Cas.”

Castiel lifts his hands to Dean’s waist. “Should I risk it?” he whispers.

Dean sighs and turns his head to look at Impala. “What do you think, Baby, should we risk it?”

It has been a long time since Impala has seen Gabriel, though she didn’t know him well. And her name was not Impala then, not yet. But she thinks that maybe Castiel has the right of it. She nickers her support.

Dean’s eyes widen. “Huh,” he says. “I think that’s a yes?”
Castiel wraps his arms properly around Dean, pulling him that much closer. “I won’t do it if I don’t have your support.”

They stare at each other again, but this time Impala chooses not to interrupt.

At length, Dean answers. “Maybe run it by Sam first, but…I trust your instincts, too.”

The king relaxes, and melts into his consort, and they kiss. Impala turns her head to give them some privacy, but not for too long. Even horses as strong as she need their rest, and so too does royalty. She taps her hoof on the ground to get their attention. “Okay, Baby,” says Dean as he breaks away, though he’s still smiling at Castiel. They each grab a comb. Castiel takes to her mane, and Dean, her tail. They rode long and hard that day, starting as the sun was rising, and they covered a greater swathe of land than is their wont. Between the wind and the dirt, there are many knots and snarls.

Impala has been called by many names, though rarely her first and truest one. None were so lovely as “Baby,” which she treasures, for Dean shows her a fierce love and honest tenderness that she never before has known. But most people these days call her Impala, which Dean gave her as well, the day she found him.

She had been without a companion for many years, which she spent instead with various bands of horses across the plains, whosoever in her queendom needed her. Coming across little Dean, at four summers and still a colt as humans reckon it, was a divine portent that not even she understood. All she knew at the time was that she liked the brightness of his soul; it had newly grown in capacity after the birth of another foal in the family, with none of the contingent jealousy and negative feelings that it usually wrought. She liked, too, that despite her size he was unafraid of her. His sweetness and his bravery did not mean that he would remain so, as humans so often lose these qualities as they grow, but she thought she might be content spending a year or so with him.

As a bonus children were more open to the divine, so she called the wind to form her name in his tiny shell of an ear so that a human might understand. *Epona*, she whispered, *Epona*.

Sadly his band of people were too far removed from her worshippers of old, and did not recognize her name. Instead his mind understood it to be the name of a deer from a distant land, one that his dam and sire sometimes mentioned in passing, great hunters as they were.

“Impala!” Dean said.
And, in the way of magic, that was her new name.

As her Dean now finishes with her tail, Castiel carefully combs through her forelock, then making sure Dean does not notice, he takes a kerchief from his pocket and gives her horn a quick polish. His magic has grown of late, and he has just recently begun to see it, in the dusk or dawn, out of the corner of his eye. He has not, however, rediscovered the horse that still lives inside of his soul and gone running with her across the plains. But soon, she is certain of it. She appreciates, too, that he mentions nothing to her Dean, and respects her secrets. Dean must come to understand the bond they share in his own time.

Only then can he know: of all riders in Michaeretz, the Goddess of Horses chose him.
Appendix of Names and Places

CHAMARAN ETYMOLOGY

Chamara—The continent on this world that was under the rule of either The Great Sorcerer Charles (Chuck) or his sister The Great Sorceress Amara at various times throughout history. For millennia the land belonged in whole or in part to both or either of them. Eventually the Final War between them decimated the land and peoples so completely that a new beginning was inevitable. The continent was split into four kingdoms to give to Chuck’s direct descendants, as Amara had none. In honor of the greatest sorcerers the world has ever known, the kings and queen jointly dubbed their continent Chamara.

Names and Places of Michaeretz

The people and places of Michaeretz owe their names to Hebrew and English.
**Michaeretz**—The kingdom draws its name from its first ruler Michael, and the Hebrew word *eretz*, which can be translated as land, country, etc. The name Michael, of course, is also Hebrew in origin. I did have a discussion with a friend who has a passing knowledge of Hebrew, and she explained to me that it’s not a language given to compound words in the way Germanic languages (like English) are. The owner typically also comes after the possession, so it seems backwards. From that perspective, something like Eretz Michael looks a little better to a Hebrew-knowledgeable eye. We also tossed around using Mamlakhi, Mamlakhah, or other derivations of the Hebrew word for “kingdom,” but ultimately I decided against it. This is because, mostly, it felt too out of place on a continent in which all the other names were derived from Indo-European languages (and I didn’t want “Michael” as a standalone in a name). I meant no disrespect to students or speakers of Hebrew, so if you found it jarring I apologize.

**Micharim Mountains**—The mountain range which separates Michaeretz from Lokiland (also simply referred to as the Micharim). Similar to Michaeretz itself, it is a pseudo-compound derived from the name Michael and (as far as I can tell without being able to decline in the language) harim, the Hebrew for mountains. Yes, much like the Sahara Desert, the people call it the Michael Mountains.

**Mount Heaven**—An enormous butte rising from the Great Plains of Michaeretz. It is the country’s capital. I conceived the castle and city which dwell on it as an (un)holy amalgamation of Mont St. Michel (heh, still Michael), the towns that perch on the eroding calanchi of Italy, both Edoras and Minas Tirith from *The Lord of the Rings*, Devils Tower, and numerous other buttes of the Great Plains of the United States. Except, like several times bigger.

**Reapers**—Michaeretz’s warrior elite. Unlike regular troops or even knights, they are entrusted with magic spells to aid them in battle.

**Winchester**—The largely rural region from which Sam and Dean hail. Still too unspecialized and “underdeveloped” to associate last names with professions, in which case they probably would have had the surname of Hunter. John and Mary owned their little plot of land underneath the regional lord, and were yeomen as well as hunter-gatherers for their little village.

**Greenwood Forest**—Yeah, I know. The Green Woods Woods. Spreading wide on either side of the River Voda, it marks the natural border between Michaeretz and Luciterra. Rowena uses the term *Coilluaine*, another pseudo-compound I Frankenstein-ed from the Scottish Gaelic words *coille* (forest) and *uaine* (green). I have no idea whether this looks super weird to Gaelic speakers or not. All due respect.

**Eastern Marshes**—The nigh-impassable wetlands delineating Michaeretz and Rafaelia.

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**Names and Places of Rafaelia**
Rafaelia—Raphael’s queendom. The spelling of the name “Rafael” is meant to approximate a latinate spelling of the Greek Raphael. “-ia” is a classical noun ending, in this case (ha!) in honor of Greek.

Telmalos—The Marsh Marsh. Or if you like, the Swamp Swamp. Though perhaps you’re bi-bog, and prefer the Swamp Marsh. Regardless, it’s yet another Frankenword from the Greek words telma and elos (again, to butcher the language was not my intent). This is the proper Rafaelian term for the Eastern Marshes which form the natural border between the queendom and Michaeretz.

Names and Places of Luciterra

Luciterra—Derived from the name Lucifer and the Latin for land, terra. Lucifer itself is derived from Latin, meaning “lightbringer,” an epithet of Lucifer’s you may have seen before. So really the country’s name is Land of Light.

Silviridia—Luciterran term for the Greenwood Forest, it derives from the Latin silva (forest) and viriditas (greenness).

Demons—Luciterra’s warrior elite. From the Latin daemon, which itself comes from the Greek daimon. Along with the Luciterran term Berserker Demon, “berserker” coming from Old Norse, this indicates that perhaps Lucifer’s supposed ingenuity is not so great as he makes it out to be.

Names and Places of Lokiland

After retreating from his siblings, Gabriel took on the title of Loki. The places of Lokiland owe their names to Germanic language conventions. Thus it is separated from the other three countries which are still somewhat steeped in traditionally biblical tongues.

Lokiland—The kingdom of Loki-Gabriel. The topography of this country suits his needs, as the Lokibergen cut off easy passage to the south and east and the ocean cuts off the north and west, not to mention the difficult to navigate fjords and harsh arctic tundra in the kingdom’s upper reaches.

Lokibergen—The great mountain range separating Lokiland from Michaeretz. Derived from Loki and berg(en), the word/root for “mountain(s)” in several Germanic languages. Thus, Loki’s Mountains.
Lokistad—The fabled, possibly mythical capital of Lokiland. The truth of it has passed out of Michaeretz’s memory. The name owes itself to the Germanic word/root for city or town. Therefore, Loki’s City.

The Rivers

River Voda—The longest and widest river in Chamara. Starting in the Micharim Mountains, it tumbles to the plains, contributes to the southern Telmalos, and eventually empties into the eastern ocean which borders Rafaelia. Where it separates the kingdoms of Michaeretz to the north and Luciterra to the south, a forest vast and near-impenetrable has grown since time immemorial. Voda is the Czech word for water (and similar to “water” in other Slavic languages). In ancient times it was simply known as the Voda, though it’s now often the River Water.

Reka River—A major river of Michaeretz, though smaller than the Voda. It trickles down from the Micharim and passes not too far from Mt. Heaven, to which it supplies water, and travels across the country until emptying into the Eastern Marshes. It retains a vulgarized version of its ancient name, which would have been řeka, Czech for river. It’s River River.

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