Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

by linoresearch

Summary

The year is 1722 and across the oceans merchant ships are hounded by pirates. Killing and stealing their way to infamy, the Winchesters plague the trade-routes to the New World, leaving a trail of death and devastation across the Spanish Main. They are villains, and every ship that sails under the colours of the Royal Navy has been tasked with bringing them to justice; sentenced to hang by the neck until dead.

When the lookout of the navy frigate, the Lady Mary, calls ship-ahoy from the crow’s nest, first-mate Lieutenant Castiel Novak has no idea how his life is about to change. In a swashbuckling adventure across the high-seas, Castiel faces sea-monsters, ghost-ships, and much more, in the race to secure a valuable and dangerous prize. Thrown in among the pirates aboard the Black Impala, he also learns that Captain Dean Winchester can be hard to resist.

****updated very sporadically but will be finished even if it takes another 5 years, [update April 2019] make that 10 years, because I only seem to working at a rate of 1-2 chapters a year :D ****

Notes
This is my first go as posting a fic as a work in progress, but rest assured I do have a full story-arc planned out and this story will be completed (eventually). I've gone for the flavour of historical accuracy rather than actual accuracy, so please forgive any glaring errors. I'd like to say a big thank you to my beta Katie who is a wonderful writer and you should go check out all her stuff!!!

Thank you for visiting to read my fic! :D Kudos and comments are always gratefully received. If you have any questions about the story, please feel free to contact me on tumblr.
Sometimes it’s the smallest things that change the course of a life; a wrong turn in a dark street, the
flash of bright eyes above a lace-edged fan, a favour granted or a debt repaid—any ripple on the
ocean may swell into a storm. Oh yes: sometimes it’s the smallest things. Then again, sometimes you
get kidnapped by pirates and everything slides straight to hell.

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The deck tilts, bowsprit lifted high on green-grey waves that heave and roll like the shoulders of
giants. The great ship aches and groans, her timbers straining as she is battered by the storm, thrown
about like nothing more than flotsam on a spring tide. And first-mate he may be, but Lieutenant
Castiel Novak is no more sure-footed or unsinkable than any other sailor on the Lady Mary. He slips
as the ground tilts away from his heels, the loss brings a nauseous turn to his stomach before he’s
sent reeling towards the maw of the turbulent sea.

He flings his arms wide, and it’s luck alone that sees him catch a hand in the rigging, the ropes
hanging low, still smouldering from a close call with a cannonball; tempestuous weather is not the
only danger lurking among the valuable shipping lanes of the world.

Castiel hangs there, fingers entwined in the ropes swinging above his head, stealing a moment to
drag in a pungent lungful of salt and gunpowder, as the ship crests a wave. She holds still for an
unsure moment before gravity takes over and ship and crew are sent plunging down the lee side of
the giant swell.

The world falls, and the Lady Mary—one of the most respected frigates under the flag of the Royal
Navy—lets out an almighty cry, her spars and rivets straining to keep the hull together as she crashes
down. Violent waters rush up to meet her, washing over the deck and taking men down with them as
they retreat.

Castiel is thrown forward as the angle changes, and the rope that goes slack around his hand cannot
stop him landing face-first on the sodden deck. Air is punched from his lungs, and bubbles from his
lips into the streams of breakwater soaking the deck bow to stern, filthy with ashes and blood. The
world fades as he struggles to catch his breath, his vision blurring to a watercolor wash of blue and
grey before sharpening again into bold reds, yellows, and black; the colours of battle.

The sailors are shouting, some cling to the rigging, frozen in their fear, others heave on the pulleys,
trying desperately to bring her around, to navigate the storm and shake off the pirate ship rapidly
closing in on the starboard side. But the storm that sprang to life less than an hour ago has ideas of its
own, and the wind changes direction faster than the men can trim and turn the sails.

The pirates bear down on them. The great, black-hulled beast of a ship sails true, seemingly
untroubled by the tempest that rages around them. Marines open fire as they draw close, moving with
the roll of the waves, but muskets and shot are poor fare in comparison to the fire-power of a fully
armed pirate ship.

The air tastes of ashes, and for the first time Castiel sees the startling possibility that they could lose
this fight. And the idea that his ship, his crew, a hundred or more good navy men, could be lost to the
very pirate scourge they have been hunting for months, is anathema to him; turning Castiel’s heart to stone in his chest.

The pirates should be running from them. The Lady Mary has chased down many pirate schooners and sloops over the years—light ships with good speeds, perfect for quick attacks on the lumbering merchant vessels that inhabit the shipping lanes, their holds bulging with goods—and now pirates flee at first sight of a navy frigate like the Lady Mary, standing tall and proud above the waterline. Twenty-eight gunned and fast-as-you-like, they have chased buccaneers across oceans, criss-crossed the ocean from the Americas to England and back, to leave a trail of burning ships and pirates in chains behind them. The Black Impala, however, is no twelve-man sloop dashing about in shallow waters, she is a warship and a different animal altogether.

The crew of the Lady Mary were confident of their success when they started the chase, sure of their superior strength and combat training—with their navy issue guns, heavy cannon, and smart blue coats of gentlemen—no one considered what would happen if the pirate scum decided to fight; but fight they did.

“Rally the men!” Captain Campbell shouts, his voice is firm though barely heard above the stuttered roar of the storm and the cries of panicked men. He’s tied to the wheel, rope lashed through the spokes and around his waist to hold him up; to make the statement that he will keep to his place, come what may. Defeat is not an option, surrender unthinkable, the Captain is ready to look death in the eye and to hold fast, whether the end comes at the hands of the pirates or in the cold arms of the sea. “Ready the starboard cannon,” he orders. “If we go down, we’ll damned well take the Winchesters with us.” He spits on the floor, mouth bitter and filthy with the name of the Winchester pirates, before drawing his sword, lifting it high above his head as he curses them.

The Captain is almost beyond sense in his fury and his fear. Castiel has great respect for the man; he’s hard, determined, and has a single minded-focus that is essential to a man of his standing, but Castiel has never seen the captain like this before. He is so lost to his anger that foam sticks to the red corners of his lips, and Castiel hears him shout as makes his way back to his post, dodging across the deck and behind the marines who are trying to form a defensive line behind the starboard gunwale. He can’t make out every word the Captain says but the message is clear; “You’ll die! You’ll be hung for the villains you are! Traitors and pirates, just like your father!”

All the while, the Black Impala bears down on them, big and dark-hulled she looks like a monster, an implacable shadow snapping at their heels ready to swallow them whole. She is as terrible a beauty as the stories say. Castiel has little time for mariners’ tales in general—nothing but superstition and exaggeration—but the Black Impala and the vicious Winchester pirates who sail her are notorious; scourge of the Caribbean; a bloody trail left in their wake for the best part of twenty years, despite the original Captain Winchester having his neck stretched more than a decade ago.

Castiel calls to the crew that are still standing, those that survived the first volley of cannon-fire. He gathers a small group to him, every one of them ashen faced and breathless. “Turner, Holland, douse the fire at the foremast,” he orders, pointing to a smoking pile of rope looped around the base of the mast. “Make sure the fire is out completely, if the mast falls we’re done for.”

“We’re done for anyway.” Midshipman Holland’s lip quivers as he speaks, and Castiel realises the young man’s eyes are red and swollen, wet from more than just smoke and sea-spray. “These Winchester’s, they’re insane, they’ll kill us all.” He looks in appeal to the others, his head wobbling on his thin neck, his pulse visible in the rapid fluttering of a thick blue vein at his throat.

Some of the other men nod in agreement; Bryant, Carr, and even Engleby, their eyes dull and expressions hopeless. It comes as a surprise to Castiel; Engleby in particular he always thought was
one of the steadier midshipman, a good sensible head on his shoulders, and destined to make something of himself.

“It’s not over yet,” Castiel tells them. Motivating the crew has never been his forte—best suited to obeying his superiors and commanding the lower ranks with a firm but fair hand—and he gropes around for words that will send the men on their way with a spark of hope burning in their breasts. “Have faith that the marines will win the day. And if they fail... If they fail then, God help us, we will fight to the last man!” He stands straight amid the chaos, trying not to slip on the water-logged deck, ignores the sting as he is pelted by squally blasts of ice-cold rain that scatter with a hissing petulance across the boards, and thumps a closed fist across his heart—it is a favoured action of the captain. “To the last man!” Castiel calls, getting swept up in his own words.

He sees it, the first glimmer of hope, a burst of anger instead of fear glinting in the men’s eyes, and Castiel knows he has them. He draws in a breath, tastes the metallic tang of spent gunpowder on the back of his tongue, and starts to repeat the orders, when the world explodes into smoke and confusion all around.

Castiel is thrown onto his back, forced to cover his head with his arms to protect himself from the splinters and debris that rain down. His ears ring from the cannon blast, and he blinks through the sting of his eyes to make out the ruin of the foremast; a perfect shot, a fluke, too disciplined to be attributed to the skill of any pirate, severed cleanly beneath the topsail. Pale un-weathered wood from deep inside the mast is revealed at the jagged stump, spikes of raw wood rising up like sharpened teeth.

Castiel staggers to his feet, the thick smoke and raised voices across the ship tell him that more than one cannon was fired on them. He runs his hands quickly over his body, checking for damage, checking that all the moving parts are still intact, amazingly they are, he is unhurt apart from a few cuts and bruises. Others have not fared so well.

Turner and Holland are half-buried under the debris, motionless and painted liberally in red. Carr groans and rolls on his back on the deck, clutching the stump where his leg used to be, bone shattered with gruesome efficiency below the knee. The doctor’s assistant darts in and starts to haul Carr away before Castiel has managed to gather his wits enough to help. He cannot see the others. All Castiel can hope is that they are safe and not floating face-down in the rolling grey sea.

The Black Impala is almost upon them and the storm quells at her approach as if nature herself fears what she carries on her back. The rain stops. Its hissing fall abruptly halted as if someone has thrown a lever to stop the flow. The wind drops to a whisper, and the waves retreat. There is a silence of held-breath, where only the flap and billow of canvas carries through the air, and the Black Impala slides up alongside the Lady Mary.

There is no more than twenty feet of ocean between them.

“Fire... Fire all!” Captain Campbell yells.

The call is picked up by the Lieutenants, echoed along the deck and down to where the gunners wait. They are ready, running the twelve-pounders through the gunports with practiced ease, before smouldering rag meets fuse. The hard cacophony of Lady Mary’s fourteen starboard cannon fills the air. Some hit home, smashing into the Impala’s dark sides, splintering wood, shredding men and rigging alike. As the smoke clears, Castiel can see that the wounds in her side are too far above the waterline to slow their foe or send them down.

Castiel darts behind the marines re-grouping across the main deck, and heads for the quarterdeck, to stand with his captain and the other officers until the end. The pirates are now close enough that he
can see their faces, grinning and jeering and lifting their weapons into the air, putting them on display as if to say, ‘this is what waits for you... this is what’s coming.’ Many wear war paint, heads and torsos smeared with streaks of black, white and red; faces painted into the bone and shadow likeness of skulls. A caricature of the fixed grin of the frayed-edged Jolly Roger that snaps in the breeze atop of their main mast.

“Board them, quickly,” a voice growls. The words are spoken low but still carry over the noise, over the stink and the ash.

It’s sadly inevitable when the grappling hooks sail across the scant distance between the ships. There is a whistle, snap, and drag as one of them lands at Castiel’s feet, rope snaking away back across the deck as it’s pulled tight and the four-pronged hook bites into the deck.

“Lieutenant Novak!” the captain cries, “Cut that damned line.” Castiel crouches and sets his short sword to the task, sawing frantically at the plaited rope. It’s damp and slippery under his fingers, and although his sword is sharp enough to cut skin with ease it fails to make an impact on the heavy cord.

“Out of the way, Lieutenant,” the boatswain cries, swinging an axe down onto the rope where Castiel had been working a moment before. Two swings later the rope is severed from the rusted hook, sending it twisting away, limp and useless, as the pirates try to reel the ship in, slot them together side by side to board. The boatswain offers Castiel a hand up which he gladly accepts. “I’m sure you loosened it up for me, Sir,” the boatswain says, rather too earnest to be anything approaching honest.

Castiel would smile at his cheek at another time, but a rapid succession of cracks and crunches interrupts them. A dozen more hooks thrown over the gunwale scrape their way over the deck, catching in the wooden skin of the Lady Mary like burs on a cat. The ship lurches starboard as the pirates start to pull her in, and half the navy crew lose their footing as the ships meet with a creaking jolt. This time Castiel manages to stay upright. The boatswain is not so lucky. Castiel grabs his arm, taking the man’s full weight to heave him onto his feet.

There is a roar from the Black Impala, louder than seems possible for a pirate crew that number no more than eighty men, and the first of the buccaneers leap onto the deck of the Lady Mary.

“Marines, fire!” a sergeant yells at the remains of the company.

The first-line muskets discharge, and for a moment the attackers disappear behind a wall of powder-smoke. The second line drops to a knee and takes aim as the first reloads. Their movements are meticulously fine-tuned, but not fast enough. Orange flashes in the grey-haze speak of lit gunpowder, one after the other, flaring in haphazard patterns and falling to the ground like tiny clusters of stars. Each shot takes a man out with terrifying accuracy until every marine is gasping in pain or utterly silent.

The first pirate appears from the mist like a spectre, a horror, bloodied visage grinning madly, face daubed in white and divided by a smear of darkness where his eyes should be. He turns towards Castiel, and the stoic navy man feels an icy stab of fear and the conviction that he is in the presence of evil. The pirate lifts a pistol and aims it squarely between Castiel’s brows. He goes slightly crossed-eyed staring at the open-end of the muzzle, waiting for the pirate to pull the trigger. But the pirate just stares, dark eyes searching. Whatever he is looking for he apparently doesn’t find in Castiel, and he moves on quickly, a dozen men following at his heels.

The boatswain at Castiel’s side has gone limp, fallen into a faint perhaps. Castiel shakes him to wake him up, he is a heavy burden for one man to manage. The boatswain’s head rolls loose on his neck and Castiel finds he is looking at a hole in the side of the boatswain’s face. His cheek torn open to
expose yellowed teeth and the broken edge of his jawbone. Castiel flinches away, unintentionally dropping the body to the deck where the boatswain lands with a leaden thump.

Castiel looks to the captain. With alarm he realises the dark-eyed man is making his way to the quarterdeck. He tries to follow, jumping over bodies and squeezing between men locked in bloody combat as he runs. Castiel is one footstep from the stairs when his luck runs out. Someone hooks his legs out from under him and he tumbles to the ground.

Moving on instinct he rolls to the side to regain his footing, just in time to catch the silver glint of a cutlass as it arcs towards him across his field of vision. Defence is immediate and ingrained as Castiel blocks the sweeping cut that would separate his head from his shoulders. With both hands on the hilt of his blade he has the power he needs to push his attacker away. Castiel tries to rush the pirate, to use his size and strength against the smaller man, but his assailant spins away, slashing as he goes, and Castiel feels the edge of the blade bite into the back of his hand.

From the corner of his eye, Castiel can see the captain’s guard forming a rough circle as the villains close in.

“Got to work harder than that to beat me, old man,” the young pirate crows as he lunges, on the attack again.

This time Castiel is ready. He easily blocks the thrust before stepping away, using the movement to check if there is a way open to the quarterdeck.

“I’m not that old,” Castiel says, indignant. The pirate grins under the shadow of his hat—it’s too big, made for someone else of course, most likely stolen from the dead—and darts back in. He’s quick, but so is Castiel, and each advance is met with a proficient defence, each clash of steel-on-steel becomes a stalemate.

The captain is shouting from somewhere to Castiel’s right. “You won’t get away with it! Whatever you do to me, you’re still going to burn!” He starts to speak again but the words cut off with a sharp cry.

It’s the distraction the pirate needed and he presses his advantage and pushing Castiel back until he steps in a slimy puddle of entrails, spilled from some poor exploded fellow. He slips, feet skidding comically in the still-steaming gunk. The pirate twists the cutlass in his hand, and Castiel’s short blade, caught on the curved edge, clatters to the floor before he knows what happened.

He expects to be run through at any moment, but instead he receives a sharp kick to his privates and ends up half kneeling in among ropes of innards. He suppresses a grimace at the pain as he looks up at his attacker in surprise.

He is young, this pirate, soft-faced beneath the war-paint, with wisps of red hair poking out from beneath his wide-brimmed hat. The point of his sword hangs in mid-air, directed towards Castiel’s heart with a steady hand. The boy’s eyes glitter triumphantly, the whites standing out against the dark Egyptian kohl smeared beneath.

He is too eager, too sure of himself. A few years among the barbarity of the pirates is nothing to the years of sparring and drills and battle-experience Castiel has behind him.

“Surrender, and I might let you live,” he says.

Castiel takes a steadying breath. “Unlikely,” he replies, and pushes up fast.

The boy cries in dismay as Castiel shoulders the point of the blade aside. He grasps the hilt with his
uninjured hand, crushing the boy’s fingers until the bones grate against metal. A hot glob of spittle lands on Castiel’s cheek, sliding slowly to his chin, and the lad’s eyes go wide with fear when Castiel turns the full force of a scowl upon him.

With one hand injured and the other keeping the blade at bay, Castiel’s options are limited. If he lets the lad go he’ll take a swing or pull a second blade. Castiel takes in his situation, evaluates his options, and brings his head down hard to smashing against the bridge of his opponent’s nose. An audible crack and a shower of blood later the boy stumbles back, sagging at the knees as his fingers move to his face and his swelling nose. Castiel flips his sword up off the ground using the toe of his boot, catching it easily before bringing the hilt down and across the back of the boy’s head. He falls to the floor unconscious but he will live; Castiel is a decent fighter, but he prides himself on not being a killer.

He looks back to the quarterdeck, where the captain is now engaged in a fight with the demonic-looking man Castiel assumes is the pirates’ leader—he won’t name him as a captain, no pirate deserves such a title. There is not much he can do with only one good hand, but he pledged himself to the navy, to obey his captain’s commands, and he will not flinch from that course even if it means he meets his end.

Two steps up towards the quarterdeck, sword in hand and ready to fight, Castiel hears a soft, “Lieutenant Novak!” An urgent whisper from somewhere near his feet. He looks down to find a pair of wide wet eyes peering through a crack in the door to the storeroom, tucked away to one side of the steps. “In here, Lieutenant,” one of the cadets pleads through the gap.

All around him men are falling, sliding from the point of a pirate’s sword, or throwing down their weapons in surrender and placing their futures in untrustworthy hands. Up above his head the ring leader has the captain on his knees, held at the shoulders by two other men, and a scarlet slash runs bright across his forehead.

The day is lost.

“Come on, Lieutenant, quickly. Before they see us!” The boy sounds so earnest that, against his better judgement, Castiel goes to him. Sliding into the cramped store—more of a cupboard really—where the crew hold a stock of emergency supplies to top up the launch and the dinghy’s they carry, should the worst ever happen. Castiel has no thought for himself, but he pities the boy and will offer reassurance if he can.

A glance around shows five more pairs of eyes blinking at Castiel from the shadows. It stinks of fear.

They are children, not one of them has seen more than fourteen years. It suddenly strikes Castiel as overwhelmingly unfair that such young creatures, so full of hope and promise, should find themselves here; held hostage, or worse, at the point of a pirate’s blade, and for what? The Lady Mary is a navy ship, they carry no treasure, there is no gold from the Spanish Main filling the hold, all they have are supplies to feed the crew, and men to run the ship.

Fury swells in Castiel’s chest at the stupidity of it, the pointlessness of all the death beyond the door. It builds like a furnace behind his ribs until his blood boils, heat rising to his face, fingers flexing around the hilt of his blade—he wants to fight.

“Don’t go,” says cadet Blacklock, his small hand light on Castiel’s wrist as if he could hold him back with the force of his misery alone.

Blacklock only joined recently, accompanying Lieutenant Dillon as servant last time they put in at Plymouth. Dillon died of fever within a month but the boy went on, ruddy with health and a growing
passion for the sea.

“Please don’t leave us,” he whispers now. “I don’t want to be eaten.”

“What?” Castiel asks, confused by the comment.

Scottie Furness the cabin boy, twelve years old at most, jumps in with a ready answer. “The Winchester pirates, we heard they was cannibals. That they learned it growing up on the islands, and those they don’t kill outright, they gets taken on board the Black Impala, and hung up as fresh meat for the crew.” Further back in the room someone snuffles, trying to hold back a sob of terror. The light is too dim for Castiel to know where it came from. “If they come for us,” Scottie goes on, “you can do us in first can’t you?” The boy looks at the sword in Castiel’s hand. “We’d rather go quick at a friend’s hand than be chopped up and ate slow, bit by bit.”

“They like the young meat the best,” Blacklock adds, nodding, solemn and sure in his words. “That’s what Master Jonas told me.”

“Then Master Jonas is a fool. They’re just stories,” Castiel reassures as best he can, “pirates are still men, and just as likely to bleed or die or eat roast beef as the rest of us.”

He presses his eye to the crack in the door. The fight outside is winding down quickly, the last of the crew being herded together on deck, kneeling in a line among the bodies of the fallen. The breakwater trapped on the deck has turned a sickly pink. It washes over the prisoners knees and soaks their woollen slops to the thigh.

The boards over Castiel’s head rattle with the heavy steps of pirates making their way across the quarterdeck, followed by the erratic thumps of a squirming body being dragged along. Castiel does not need to hear Captain Campbell’s protests to know who is being pushed about so casually. In the storeroom they hear him as clearly as if he was in the room with them.

In a darkened corner someone whimpers.

“Quiet,” Castiel orders, intent on following the events unfolding just a few inches and a hand-span of wood above them.

“Take your filthy hands off me,” Campbell growls. “You Winchester’s, you think you’re so superior, but you’ll end the same as your father.” He’s laughing, verging on hysterical. “It was a pleasure to see him hang, each kick was a blessing.”

There is a muffled cry and a new voice speaks. “How do you like kicks now, huh?” The words are salt-rough, the way only an old sailor can make them, an echo of the low rumble of thunder on the horizon.

“Leave him, Mr Singer.” The order is spoken by the same sure voice that sent the pirates aboard the Lady Mary. Low and dark enough to send shivers down Castiel’s spine. The creak of the deck describes the short steps that bring the speaker closer. “He’s mine to deal with.”

“Aye, Captain,” Mr Singer says, confirming Castiel’s suspicion of the painted man’s identity.

“This is family business,” the pirate captain says, but it is spoken so quiet Castiel is half convinced he imagined it.

Out on the main deck pirates are rounding up all the men still alive, searching the lower decks as more and more crewmen—gunners, riggers, marines, and cooks—are brought up into the dull light of day, the sky still overcast as the storm blows itself out.
“Lower-decks are clear, Captain,” someone shouts, and even with his face pressed flush to the split in the door, the speaker is hidden from Castiel’s view.

There are more footsteps, and a low groan of wooden protest as someone rests their weight in the rail that frames the quarterdeck, separating it from the deck below.

“Men,” the pirate captain calls, “the ship is ours!” His words are met with loud and hearty cheers.

“They didn’t find us,” Scottie whispers, taking advantage of the noise to cover his words. “Lieutenant, what do we do now?”

Castiel considers the contents of the room. It’s full of provisions; water, food, and waxed sheets, stocked in easy to carry vessels that can be thrown into the small boats at short notice. If they can wait out the pirates until nightfall—if the pirates did what pirates are want to do, and raid the grog rations as the first spoils of war—there is a chance the boys might be able to escape under the cover of darkness. They are not far from the shipping lanes and with just a little luck they could be picked up within the fortnight, if the weather holds. It’s a plan of ‘ifs’ but Castiel is willing to die to save the children. It would be an honourable death to sacrifice himself in their protection.

“Orders, Captain?”

“Present the prisoners right away,” Winchester is saying to Mr Singer, loud enough that the other pirates can hear. “I’ll deal with this after I’ve taken a look at the rest.”

“Very good, Captain. And the ship?”

“Move the supplies to the Impala,” he says, “then burn her.” His words receive a roar of approval from his blood-thirsty crew, and the celebrations contain more than a few words Castiel would rather the boys did not have to hear. In the clamour the rest of the pirate captain’s words are lost to the crowd, but Castiel hears them clearly. “You’ll see everything you have burned to ashes before I slit your throat.”

“No,” Captain Campbell growls. “Not the ship. Have you no loyalty? No feeling at all?”

“How can you talk about loyalty? You don’t know what it means. If you did, you would never have traded away that moth-eaten soul of yours.”

Campbell’s laugh is cruel and hollow. “You’re one to talk. I can smell the rot from here, boy. Does your brother know what revenge really cost you?”

“Shut your mouth,” is followed by the forced exhale of breath as air is punched from Captain Campbell’s lungs. More scuffled sounds of a struggle make their way down to Castiel’s ears and the boys trembling in the dark.

“He’s useless, Captain,” says Mr Singer. “He’s never going to give us the location, or the sea-witch.”

Captain Campbell’s chuckle ends in a gurgle of pain and Castiel is glad he cannot see the cause. His blood is still rushing loud in his ears from the fight, the sting of the cut across his hand dulled to little more than a throb that pulses in time with his heartbeat, and he is already half a second from rushing out to defend his captain—only his concern for the young cadets holds him back.

“Stand him up,” Winchester orders. “He can join the rest of them.”

A series of scrapes and thumps sends grit tumbling down through the storeroom where it sticks to their sweat-damp skin.
“You think you can stand in judgement over me,” Captain Campbell shouts. His words are slurred now, drunk on pain and anger and poorly concealed fear. “I’ll see you in hell first, Winchester.”

A cry of warning accompanies a rush of steps.

There is a moment of stunned silence from pirate and captive alike, then the heavy crash of something landing on the main deck, just beyond the storeroom door.

“What is it?” Scottie whispers urgently, jumping to his feet.

The splintered wood digs into Castiel’s cheek as he squints through the crack, shifting to find a better view. Blacklock joins him, crouching low, where a slip of light creeps in under the door.

“The captain!” Blacklock cries in alarm before Castiel can stop him. He makes a quick prayer that the scene unfolding a few feet away is enough of a distraction that the boy’s outburst goes unnoticed.

Both captains are grappling in a horrific display of violence, vicious and base, fists and feet and gouging fingers, working furiously to pull each other apart, to force the other into red-smeared submission.

Boiling anger is palpable from both men, but anger alone is a poor weapon, and justice has been left far behind them. Campbell cannot maintain his attack or defend for long against a younger, fitter opponent, and soon Winchester puts Campbell down with a mean right hook that sends out a spray of bloodied teeth. Captain Campbell slumps to one knee in the wash of filth on-deck, head bowed, spitting red foam.

Blacklock shakes beside him, and Castiel rests a hand on his shoulder. The captain’s defeat fills him with wrath. He longs to stab the damn pirate through his black heart and rid the world of his foul presence. Castiel’s fingers tighten again on his sword but it is a useless gesture. He cannot risk the boys’ lives on such reckless urges.

On the other side of the door Captain Winchester stands the victor. “I told you I’d kill you if I saw you again, Samuel, and I keep my promises.” Castiel’s breath catches in his throat as Winchester levels the point of his sword at Campbell’s chest. “If you have any last words that are worth hearing, I’d say them now, Grandpa.”

The snarl that rips from Captain Campbell’s throat is nothing but animal. His face is twisted, warped beyond recognition as he shudders and shakes in place, consumed by madness. Or maybe not. A glint of metal by the Captain’s hand is the only warning as he leaps to his feet and charges the pirate in one last hopeless act of defiance.

Campbell’s small blade is easily turned aside as the pirate slices down across the old man’s wrist, separating skin and muscle and thick veins. Captain Campbell stumbles to a halt with the tip of the pirates blade over his heart and he grins, wide enough to show the scarlet ruins of his teeth. He starts to speak, but ends up looking down in shocked surprise at the hilt protruding from his chest.

“I didn’t think so,” the pirate says into Campbell’s ear as he draws his sword back, letting the old man crumple to the ground, mouth wide and gaping like a landed fish.

The silence afterwards is broken by a shout of, “No!” and Winchester’s head snaps around, his attention zeroing in on the storeroom, and for a moment kohl-darkened eyes lock onto Castiel’s. He flinches back from the door, only now aware of Blacklock, shuffling awkwardly away with a hand pressed to his mouth as if he could recapture the word and lock it away. His voice shakes with, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”
“Maybe they didn’t hear?” Scottie says, more in hope than belief.

“Open it.” They all hear the order. They all hear the steps of pirates rushing to their captain, rushing to obey.

“What do you all have weapons?” Castiel asks the boys, backing away as an axe bites into the wood close to the door-handle. There is a murmur of agreement in the dark. He lifts his sword and takes a breath. “Then we fight,” he says, “and Winchester is mine.”

The pirates cheer on the one wielding the axe, calling for blood now they have the scent of fresh prey. Castiel knows the plan is futile, but the only thing he can do for these children who look to him for salvation is to give them a quick and honourable death.

“For King and Country,” Castiel calls, and it’s a pretty lie; what kind of King demands the blood of children in his service?

The door shatters with a final swing and Castiel turns to face the braying crowd.

“For King and Country!” the boys echo behind him as they rush onto the deck close on Castiel’s heels.

The axe-man is shouldered out of the way with surprising ease as Castiel seeks out the pirate captain. Swift steps over dead men and shattered decking take him to where Winchester stands, looming large over Captain Campbell’s corpse. There is little more than a glimmer of interest on the pirate’s face as Castiel swings his sword-arm, aiming the blade toward the unprotected space of the pirate’s neck.

Instead of victory Castiel tastes nothing but his own blood. A blow to the back of the head bringing his teeth down onto his tongue, and for the second time that day, Castiel’s face greets the deck with little joy. His ears are ringing and there are dark patches, like swirls of smoke clouding his vision as he rolls onto his back. The Winchester is there, looking down at him with an expression Castiel cannot fathom, when the familiar face of a red-haired boy floats into view. He hefts a thick piece of wood in his hands and grins down at Castiel with smug satisfaction.

The last thing Castiel hears as he slips from the waking world is the boy asking, “So, you ready to surrender now?”
Chapter 2

Pain tells Castiel he is still alive. There is a hollow throb across his skull where he took the blow and his muscles ache, pulled taut from his neck to his shoulders. He tries and fails to lift his head from where it droops against his chest, chin damp with drool. His eyelids barely flutter when he tries to open them, and it is a herculean effort to drag them up, one at a time, until he’s staring hazily at his own blood splattered shirt.

His thoughts are thick as winter fog and reeling about like a drunken sailor, and so it takes a while for Castiel to realise there are voices close by. At first the words are dim, distant and indistinct; and perhaps this is how it will be from now on, perhaps the blow has addled his brains.

“...Why you brought him on board. We don’t take prisoners, you know that. I mean, he’s not likely to know anything if he’s not one of them, and you say you’re sure he isn’t?”

“Completely sure. You know how this works, Sam. And Samuel knew what was going on right under his nose, so why not the first mate? He would have needed someone in his corner to keep it hidden.”

His captain’s name sparks the savage memory of Samuel Campbell’s death. As horrifically vivid as the real thing, Castiel remembers the sword sliding into Campbell’s belly, sees the captain hiss and curse at the pirate, sees the point of the blade that bursts from his back...

“Or he has Lieutenants who are good at following orders.”

“Well, we’ll find out who’s right once he wakes up.”

… All while the pirate watches with dead-eyes and a sneer on his face.

“I suppose we’ll have to, since we won’t be getting anything out of Campbell now, will we, Dean?”

“Hey, he got what he deserved. And how about we keep it to ‘Captain’ in front of the prisoner?”

“I don’t disagree, Captain. I’m just saying we could have waited, done the thing properly.”

Even with a sluggish brain Castiel manages to recognise one of the voices—he heard it clear enough through the storeroom ceiling, trapped in the cramped space with half a dozen terrified children...

The children...

Where are the children?

No. Castiel can not allow himself to think about that. If he’s lucky, the pirates will kill him quickly and he’ll never have to wonder what became of the cadets, or what they might have suffered because he could not save them.

“He didn’t deserve proper, Sam. What he did...”

“I know, Dean. I know. But how you get... You weren’t thinking straight.”

“My thinking was fine.”

With Captain Winchester preoccupied, Castiel tests out his range of movement. He can feel the scrape of rough twine biting at his wrists as he twists them to assess the strength of the knots and
whether there’s any scope for loosening them.

There is no need for a formal escape plan. Nowhere will be safe for him on board the Black Impala. Nevertheless, it is his duty as a naval officer to take any opportunity to right the wrongs done to his captain and his crew, to fight back in any way possible. He will take any injury he can inflict, any trouble he can cause—be it to the ship, the crew, or in a perfect world the vile Captain Winchester himself—as some small justice for the destruction of the Lady Mary.

“So you end up with the first mate instead of the captain because you had some cunning plan worked out in advance, did you?”

“Shut up, Sam.”

“No. I’m serious, Dean. This is starting to be a problem…”

“I said, shut up!” And this time, it’s an order not an insult. There is no mistaking the hard clipped words.

Castiel freezes, keeps his eyes fixed on a rusty curl of dried blood beyond the tip of his nose. He can smell it, metallic and salt, can almost taste it, mineral and cloying, dragged in over his tongue with every laboured breath.

“You hear that?” the Captain asks. The floorboards creak as he comes closer. Castiel stops breathing. “I think Sleeping Beauty here is finally awake.” The clack of well-heeled boots on polished boards brings with it a finger pushed against Castiel’s chin, encouraging him to look up. He lifts his head, expression settled into defiance, and faces his captors.

“Thought you were going to snooze the whole day away, Lieutenant,” Captain Winchester—Dean, apparently—grins at him.

Castiel would give anything for divine intervention to free him from his bonds so he could punch the offensive smile from the pirate’s painted face.

“Apologies,” Castiel says instead, clear and formal. He will not allow his voice to shake, nor give villains the satisfaction of acknowledging his injuries, though they buzz at the edge of his consciousness, clamouring to be noticed. “I didn’t realise the time.”

Winchester’s eyes go wide, but Castiel’s triumph is short lived as the captain throws his head back and laughs. It is a warm, honeyed sound, full-bellied, and in another place Castiel would believe it to be earnest. But he is no fool and he knows what the pirates are about. It is a sham, an interrogation, where nothing is ever what it seems.

“I like you, Lieutenant,” Dean says, holding a small bladed knife casually in his hand. He uses it to point at Castiel as he talks. “It’s a shame I’ll probably have to kill you.”

“Dean, this isn’t how we do things.”

Castiel glances over Dean’s shoulder to get a look at the owner of the other voice. A man stands at the captain’s side, filling more space than is sensible for one person. Castiel recognises him from the attack on the Lady Mary. Sam Winchester, of course it is. Everyone knows the Winchester brothers have travelled together ever since the younger one turned traitor, running back to his shameful family and away from the good graces of the navy and an ill deserved position as petty officer. Castiel may not put much faith in rumours but here they have the ring of truth; a pirate as tall as two men together and strong enough to put a hole in the hull of a ship with his fist.
Castiel’s gaze moves back to Dean, ignoring the fire-burst of pain across his shoulders as he lifts his head.

“I’ll tell you nothing.” There can be no misunderstanding here. “Whether I have anything of use to you or not, I will not betray my captain, God rest his soul, or my King.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “And if you knew anything about Captain Campbell, you’d be thanking us right now, believe me.”

“And are you going to enlighten me and tell me of his crimes?” Castiel asks politely. He looks straight ahead, keeps his eyes fixed on a spot against the back of the room where a polished disk of silver hangs from the wall in lieu of a looking glass—some things are too breakable to risk on rough seas. “You’re a bigger fool than you look if you think I’d believe the lies of pirates who murder innocent sailors.”

The captain scoffs, and it only serves to make Castiel more determined to hold fast to his words. No pirate will profit from him, no matter what torture they inflict. Castiel Novak gave his life and loyalty to the navy at sixteen years old; the admiralty, the captain, the crew, they are more his family than the strangers in England who share his name. He will bleed for them willingly.

“It’s going well so far,” Sam mutters, and even Castiel, who is not famed for feats of perception, can sense that he is needling his brother. Any such cheek to a navy captain, brother or not, would meet with serious consequences; many a seaman has faced the lash for a lot less.

“Do you want to deal with him then?” Dean asks, turning on his brother.

“Yes, I do.”

The answer is unexpected and Dean’s expression turns sour. “You know, you’re always telling me I’m a fool as well, so you two will probably get along great,” Dean moves out of the way and ushers Sam closer. “Maybe you could braid each other’s hair and exchange friendship rings while you’re at it,” he mutters as he retreats towards the back of the room.

“I’ll think about it,” Sam says as he drags a chair over to take up position in front of Castiel. “And go wash that filth off yourself,” he tells his Dean over his shoulder, “you stink.”

“Gee, thanks.” Dean stomps away, shucking a startling number of pistols and knives as he goes—Castiel can’t even begin to guess where they were all concealed—piling them on the corner of the great map-table that dominates the room. The dark patina of the wood screams of age, of planning and toil, and long years of service.

Sam Winchester is more-or-less on a level with Castiel when he sits down. His expression open, and when he speaks his tone is steady and composed. “What’s your name, Lieutenant?” he asks.

The room goes quiet as he waits for a response Castiel has no intention of giving.

A familiar backdrop of sound reaches Castiel’s ears from beyond the captain’s cabin—which is where he must be, the luxuries are spare but no other room would be so well appointed—he can hear sailors at work, the snap and billow of sails catching on a good south-westerly breeze, and the rush of waves breaking open on the bow of the great black warship. It’s a comfort, in a way, and he closes his eyes and is transported back to the Lady Mary, grasping at a moment of calm away from the uncharted waters he has found himself in.

Something pushes against his aching shoulder, making his muscles scream, and the fantasy is snatched away. “You okay?”
Castiel blinks his eyes open, reality swimming back into view.

“Did you pass out?” Sam sounds concerned. It’s an excellent bluff and Castiel considers the merit of telling him he might have done better joining a group of travelling players to make his fortune than joining up with pirates. “Charlie clocked you pretty good,” Sam says, absently tapping a finger to the back of his own head as if Castiel needed a reminder of the injury. “Dean, bring me some water.”

Dean stomps back into view holding out a pewter cup. “Bring me some water, Captain,” he grumbles, as he shoves the drink towards Castiel, handle first, so that water slops over the rim and onto the floor.

Two pairs of eyes watch Castiel expectantly.

He stares back, waits for them to catch up to the obvious problem. How the hell these two managed to become the most feared pirates on the Spanish Main he will never know.

“Oh God,” Sam says, as he fumbles to take the tankard from his brother, getting a confused look from him in the process. Realisation only seems to dawn for the captain when Sam finally holds the cup Castiel’s lips. Dean’s eyes dart to where Castiel’s arms are pulled back around the chair, his wrists fastened with twine where they meet.

For a moment Castiel thinks about rejecting the offered drink, but cool liquid against dry, cracked lips, is as welcome as the chance to wash the metallic tang of blood from his tongue.

Dean watches from a step away, before retreating to the wash stand at the back of the room. “I don’t think you’ve quite got the hang of torture there, Sam,” he throws over his shoulder as he goes. “Try asking a question and then maybe poking him with something sharp,” he says. He plunges a rag into a shallow bowl, wetting it before swiping it across his face. Castiel can see Dean’s reflection in the polished-metal shine of the mirror. He watches with a spark of fascination as dried blood, white paint, and black kohl, smear into an unholy mess at the first pass, then fading with the next.

This is how Captain Winchester’s true face is revealed, in pieces and fragments, peeled back layer-by-layer.

“What the hell are you talking about? What would I poke him with anyway?” Sam pulls a face. “Actually, don’t answer that.” Dean just laughs and sends a wink at Castiel through the mirror. Catching the exchange, Sam turns on his brother, standing and pushing his arms wide in emphasis. “For God’s sake, Dean, be serious.This is important, and you of all people should know that!”

“He said he’s not going to tell us anything.” There is a splash as Dean drops the rag back into the water before bracing his hands on the edge of the wash-stand, his head bent forward to hide his face from view. “It’s useless. Should’ve just dropped him overboard and let the fishes have him.”

“He doesn’t mean that,” Sam says, addressing Castiel directly.

“I do mean that,” Dean says, snapping his head back up. “And just remind me, did somebody die and make you captain all of a sudden?” With the warpaint gone Dean Winchester looks as tanned and alive as any other man who spends their life on the open sea. The sun and sea-spray have been kind to him, he does not show his years in weather-worn lines on his face so common in sailors, Castiel included. Dean easily pass for the younger of the two brothers. “Better yet, let me have ten minutes alone with him. I’ll bet I can get something out of him, whether it’s useful or not.” He steps forward, threat written into his stiff-backed posture.

“Dean, you do not want to go there right now,” Sam cautions. He moves with each word, until the
Winchesters meet in the middle of the room. Castiel can do nothing but watch, a helpless observer, as the temperature in the room suddenly drops.

"Maybe I do," Dean returns. "Maybe that is exactly where I want to go." His voice is hard and unyielding.

There is a seed of tension in the air, something dark, spinning out and growing between the brothers, a shadow filling up each corner of the cabin. The sun chooses that moment to dart behind an obliging cloud, and the light dims further, as if twilight had fallen like a veil across Castiel’s eyes.

Dean stares at Castiel over Sam’s shoulder. His fingers curl, clenching into fists, and Castiel can sense violence in him. The change is sudden and absolute, and all at once Castiel understands why these men are feared. Dean is a coiled spring, red-cheeked and buzzing with barely restrained energy.

"Step away, Dean. I mean it." The order trips off Sam’s tongue, easy and familiar. To give a captain such an order in the navy would be akin to mutiny.

Dean’s eyes slide from Castiel to his brother. "And what exactly do you think you can do if I don’t?" he sneers.

Sam’s hand moves to the pistol on his hip, and he stands tall and blocks Castiel’s view.

Castiel has no idea what turned the conversation from teasing to dangerous in a single breath. If it’s an interrogation tactic then it’s not one Castiel has heard of. Though, as it turns out, it is quite effective.

It isn’t fear that moves him, but the unbearable build-up of tension, a fast building pressure, like the thick heat before a tropical lightning storm. It presses at his temples and his sore head throbs like a beating heart.

"Novak!" Castiel calls out, before he is conscious of the decision to speak. The noise surprises him as much as the Winchesters and the tension in the room snaps, breaking wide open and losing its power in an instant. "Lieutenant Castiel Novak," he says on a relieved exhale. "Currently…" he starts, as the two men stare at him in wide-eyed surprise, before correcting himself “…I mean formerly, of the Lady Mary, and the Royal Navy."

The fraught moment over, the Winchesters exchange a sheepish look before heading back to their respective sides of the cabin.

"A pleasure to meet you, Castiel Novak," Sam says, drawing his chair back into position. "I’d shake hands but…” He makes a vague gesture in Castiel’s direction and Dean chuckles in the background.

"Then I’m glad to have my hands tied," Castiel replies, adding as much frost to his words as possible. He does not want the pirates to mistake his interruption for cooperation. "As a former navy man yourself, I’m sure you can understand that I don’t wish to engage with traitors."

Sam’s expression hardens, and over on the other side of the room Dean sucks in a whistling breath, drawing Castiel’s attention.

"Better tread careful there, Novak," he says, as he draws the wet cloth across his throat once more. "Sam here doesn’t much like to be reminded of his days in the navy."

"Apologies," Castiel returns, moving his gaze from the silvered reflection of one brother, to the sour-faced reality of the other. "I had no idea a pirate would feel shame at past crimes...” Castiel narrows
his eyes, watching for clues, assessing his interrogator’s reaction at the provocation, “…there must be so many for you to choose from.”

Sam’s eyes flash and his lips purse together, growing white from the pressure. “That’s enough,” he says. “You’re our prisoner and you’re here to answer our questions.”

“Oh-oh, you’ve made him angry now.” Dean’s voice swings back towards teasing. “Probably not a good idea to piss him off, since he’s the one keeping you out of the water right now.” The last words are muffled as Dean pulls his shirt up and over his head. Rust coloured splotches and ashy smears stain the linen like a record of battle. Dean seems to find it as unsavory as Castiel does, and he kicks it into a corner with a grimace.

“Be quiet,” Sam snaps. He turns to Castiel with a resigned sigh and a shake of his head. “What do you know about fleet movements in the Spanish Main?”

The sudden change of topic makes Castiel blink. “I will tell you nothing.” The interrogation is back on track, and Castiel starts to wonder if the Winchesters were playing some kind of trick on him after all, trying to catch him off guard.

It won’t work.

“When did your ship last receive orders?”

“I will tell you nothing.”

“What were your orders when you set out from England?”

“I will tell you nothing.”

“Who delivered the orders to the ship?”

“I repeat,” Castiel says, sitting straight in the uncomfortable chair as he holds Sam’s gaze. “I’ll tell you nothing. I’d rather die than help you continue your crimes.”

Sam rubs a hand across his eyes. “I don’t think you realise the situation you’re in. Your life in our hands. I don’t want to threaten you but…”

“You could give it a go.” Captain Winchester has moved on to washing the sweat from his body, completely unabashed at carrying out his ablutions in company. His brazenness is distracting and Castiel frowns, trying to project his disapproval through expression alone.

The slam of metal on wood, and a sudden lurch as the chair rocks with the force of a blow, brings Castiel’s attention front and centre, and then down, to the blade protruding from the seat between his legs. The sharp edge less than an inch from his thigh and the thick arterial veins inside.

“I don’t want to, but I will,” Sam says. “Do I have your attention, now?”

Castiel nods, but makes no attempt to reply. So here it is. The pirates are through with their games and now it’s time for them to reveal their true selves and their cruel and bloodthirsty ways. He takes a breath and does not flinch when Sam makes a show of yanking the knife from the chair.

“Let’s get this thing moving then, Sam. That smoke is going to start attracting attention soon and we need a direction.”

“Smoke?” Castiel asks. “You burned the ship?” He feels sick, has to swallow down the bile that rises
at the thought of the men, the children, left to burn in the hold or to drown in the careless sea. “The crew, what did you do to them?”

Sam grabs at the opening he’s been given. “How about this, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll answer your question if you answer mine?”

Castiel glares at him, but he has to know what happened to cadets. “The boys that were hiding with me, tell me what you did with them and I’ll think about it.” Deep down Castiel knows he has already made the bargain, but if he does not name it. If he does not say the words aloud perhaps he can pretend that he kept his honour for a little longer.

There is a smile on Sam’s face that Castiel cannot read. “That I can do.”

“Sam…” Dean interrupts, and gets shushed for his trouble.

“Despite what you might have heard, we don’t kill children.”

“So where are they?” Castiel asks again.

“We let them go. Put them in the launch and sent them on their way.” That smile appears again, and it does not look entirely genuine.

“You let them go alone?”

“Wasn’t that your plan?” Sam asks with a shrug.

“I was going to go with them,” Castiel argues. He can only think, with horror, of how many ways the cadets could have come to harm out on the ocean alone. “You’ve probably condemned them to weeks of thirst and starvation, and that’s assuming they’re lucky enough to reach the shipping lanes at all. Shooting them would be kinder.”

Dean steps back into the conversation while rubbing the cloth over his shoulders, water running down his chest in rivulets. “We gave them supplies and told them where to go. They’ll be fine.”

Castiel swallows, his mouth tacky and dry. “They better had be.”

“Or what?” Dean laughs. “You’ll come and get us? You navy guys are all the same, think you’re above the rest of us.” He stands back and opens his arms. “Well take a look around, Lieutenant, because if you hadn’t noticed, we got you beat. There’ll be no coming for us, no revenge. We did what we do, and it’s done.” In front of Castiel, Sam bites his lip to muffle a laugh. “Those boys you’re pretending to care so much about will be fine. And you know what, if anything, you should be thanking us for doing that much. There are others who would’ve done worse—and believe me,” he adds, “some things can make you wish for death.”

“We’ve held up our end,” Sam interrupts, drawing Castiel’s attention away from the captain. “Now it’s your turn to make good on the bargain, Mr Novak.”

“I don’t know,” Castiel answers honestly. “Captain Campbell never told us more than we needed to know to make the day’s sail.”

“But you knew the Captain, and he liked you,” Sam insists, “you must have had some idea?”

Castiel muses on it. Loathe though he is to give anything away he did make the deal and he is honour-bound to tell what little he knows. “South… more or less,” he hesitates. “We’d been headed south for a number of days, and south-west for some time before that.”
“That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?” Dean smirks. “Maybe we can all be friends after all.”

Castiel huffs at the idea. “Even if I knew more, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“I think he’s telling truth,” Sam says, turning to his brother who is watching Castiel speculatively.

“I’m not so sure. I think Mr Navy-man here knows something—even if he doesn’t know that he knows it. Samuel doesn’t sail with men he can’t trust.” Dean throws the dirty cloth onto the floor and with a kick it follows the ruined shirt into the corner. With a twitch of his head Dean has Sam moving away, pushing the chair back under the table that takes up so much space to Castiel’s right.

“I’ll find Bobby, tell him what we got.” Sam stoops to exit the room, but dawdles on the threshold before turning back. “Don’t do anything stupid, Dean,” he warns.

“Would I ever…?” Dean says, feigned innocence shining from wide eyes. He bats his heavy-lashed eyelids and pressed a hand to his golden-tanned chest.

Sam gives him a serious look. “There’s been enough blood spilt today.”

“That’ll be all, thank you, Mr Winchester!” the captain call out facetiously as Sam turns his back. The words slip through the door before it closes with a decisive, click.

“What are you going to do?” Castiel asks. His voice is steady, but it would be a lie to say there was no fear in his belly.

The captain looks at him, all smug smiles and bare skin to the waist. He is not dressed for battle now. Castiel cannot even see a knife on him though he surely has one hidden, yet somehow he looks all the more dangerous for it, like he could rip a man’s throat out with his teeth or tear out a man’s heart with his thick-fingered hands. He cocks his head to the side, teeth catching on his plump bottom lip as he looks Castiel over, eyes moving in a slow drag from his feet up to his eyes, where he holds Castiel’s gaze.

“Now,” he says, in a slow drawl that gives away his childhood in the colonies, “now we’re going to have a little fun.”
Chapter 3

Castiel is not afraid. He does not feel an icy stab of fear as Captain Winchester twists a brass key to lock them inside his cabin. His eyes do not stray to the blades piled haphazardly on the far side of the map-table; swords and scimitars, stilettos and daggers; any could be the instrument of his doom. He does not tremble as Dean draws near. He does not flinch as the pirate circles him with a slow swagger in his step. His pulse does not quicken when Dean leans in to breathe across the back of Castiel’s neck.

“Whatever you are going to do, just do it,” Castiel gasps, his skin prickling in anticipation of a savage touch. “I know what you are capable of. Captain Campbell told us all about what animals you Winchesters are, when first caught your scent.”

Warmth blooms where Dean rests his hands on Castiel’s shoulders. The pirate’s weight adding pressure to the touch. It hurts, muscles are strained from the binding of his wrists at his back, but it’s not wholly unpleasant. If this is torture the Captain is clearly easing into it, playing with Castiel to soften him up, so that the pain will be all the greater when it starts.

“So you were hunting us then?” Dean asks. His fingers squeeze the meat of Castiel’s shoulders before his hands slide down Castiel’s arms, fluid but firm, coming to rest at his elbows.

Castiel cannot stop the shudder that runs through his body, or the way hairs rise up on the back of his neck. “We hunt pirates, I should have thought that was obvious.”

Dean releases him, walking back into Castiel’s line of sight, circling him like a shark, his eyes keen and watching closely. “It’s not that obvious,” he smirks, “since you don’t seem to be that good at it.” He leans against the table and folds well-muscled arms over his still-bare chest.

Castiel glares.

What can he really say to that? Not much. “The Lady Mary has one of the best records in the fleet for bringing in pirates, and you of all people should know that Captain Campbell is famed for catching the infamous murderer…” Castiel’s words crumble, filling his mouth with dust until he is unable to say the name. Dean’s smile slips away.

Castiel intended to inflict pain and he has, in the only open to him, but there is shame in the attempt. Such petty behaviour is beneath him. It is their conduct that sets the navy-men apart from the pirates and common merchant seamen, their conduct makes them gentlemen and gives them honour.

“John Winchester,” Dean finishes for him, face clouded with a grim expression. Castiel has to look away. “Yeah, I know all about that. The great Samuel Campbell, what a hero, huh?” There is venom in Dean’s words and they hiss from between his teeth. “How heroic to hunt your own blood, your own family. To string up your son-in-law for piracy and murder when you know damn well he didn’t do it? Is that how you navy-types measure heroes? ‘Cause if so, I’m glad to be called a pirate.”

Castiel faces him, a frown creasing his forehead. “John Winchester was family to Captain Campbell?”

“He left that bit out, huh?”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t have to,” Dean shrugs. “Don’t make it any less true though. Mary Campbell married
John Winchester in secret and against Samuel’s wishes. John… my dad… he was a King’s privateer back then. A state-sanctioned pirate with the royal seal on his orders to prove it, and he made his fortune raiding Spanish merchant ships out of the Americas.”

“Then why turn pirate?” Castiel asks, all pretence at keeping his silence forgotten in the face of such a startling revelation. He is not sure he believes it, but his curiosity has been hooked.

“I fancy something a little stronger than water,” Dean says, picking up a small brass cup from the table. Another small luxury on show in the cabin, like the fine wooden furniture, or the cloth draped over the foot of the captain’s bed, deeply coloured in red and indigo and verdigris, and glistening with threads of eastern silk. Such are the ways in which a gentleman shows his status, but in Dean’s cabin they are not signs of wealth so much as confessions of robbery and murder.

The captain stalks over to a small cabinet set against the wall where he rummages before emerging with a triumphant, “Yes!” When he turns there is a bottle in his hand. He waves it in front of Castiel’s face. “You want some? It’s good stuff.”

“No, I don’t really…” Castiel shakes his head.

“You don’t drink?” Dean interrupts. “You’re a sailor, and you don’t drink?”

It isn’t that extraordinary.

“I do drink.” Castiel says, feeling the need to defend himself, though he has no idea why. “Just not often. I prefer to keep a clear head when I’m in command.”

Dean laughs as he drags a chair over, the same one recently vacated by his brother, and drops into it with an extravagant sigh.

“Well, you sure as hell aren’t in command here, so why not make this one of the times you do. This will probably go better for both of us, with a little liquid courage.” He holds out the cup and shakes it so Castiel can hear the liquid sloshing inside. Dean’s smirk is back. “It really is good stuff, Lieutenant. It’s no trick,” he promises.

Castiel is hardly in a position to refuse, and really, why should he? If pain and death is all he has to look forward to why not accept respite when it is offered? He tips his head back and opens his lips, ready to accept the drink from Dean’s hand.

Rum: of course it is.

It burns as he swallows, but it’s a good burn, one that sinks to his stomach and lights a fire there that relaxes his aching body, not unlike the sensation of Dean’s hands on his shoulders. Castiel readily accepts more of the drink. It’s probably a mistake, but Castiel cannot seem to care as the warmth grows and spreads, tingling through his muscles, putting feeling back into his hands, even to his fingertips.

He looks at Dean over the rim of the cup, a signal that he has drunk enough, for now at least, and finds the pirate looking back a little wild-eyed and with his teeth digging a furrow into his lip.

“You were saying,” Castiel prompts, “about your father..?”

Dean sits back, looking into the empty cup for a moment before refilling it. He swirls the liquor into a whirlpool before taking a drink. “He wasn’t a pirate,” Dean starts, without preamble. “Well, not at first anyway.”
“What changed?”

“Mary died.” He says it simply and without obvious sorrow, nothing but a quick shrug of one shoulder; a fact rehearsed and repeated so many times its power was lost long ago. “Our mom, she died when someone set fire to the house they lived in after they married. The place me and Sam were born.”

“It’s a sad fact but fires happen, and tend to take lives when they do. There have been similar deaths in my own family. It didn’t lead to piracy.”

Dean huffs a dreary laugh around another mouthful of rum. “Condolences for your loss,” he drawls, lifting the cup in a casual salute. “But I’d guess in your case an unexpected spark or unguarded flame was to blame?”

Castiel only answer is to narrow his eyes, more hurt than he would care to show at Dean’s cavalier attitude to his loss. “That’s right,” Castiel says in short clipped words.

Dean watches him for a while, the light catching in warm orange along the edge of the cup in his hand. “So you do feel it then?” he asks after a while. “You’re not all stiff upper lip and polished buttons after all, huh?”

Castiel makes no move to respond. The rum has loosened something inside and the turn of the conversation pulls at an old wound he thought lost under layers of scar tissue. There is a reason he does not think of England as home; the concept went up in smoke along with all his closest kin. This may not be the torture Castiel was expecting but it pains him nonetheless.

Oblivious to the wound, Dean pushes on with his story. “The fire that killed her was set on purpose. It was murder.” Dean shakes his head for a moment as if trying to clear his thoughts. “I used to wish it’d been something as ordinary as a careless servant,” Dean’s voice is quiet, words murmured as if talking to himself. “God, then none of this would have happened.” He laughs at the idea. “Not sure how I’d feel about that, actually,” he says, bypassing the cup altogether in favour of a long pull from the bottle, letting out a throaty sigh when he’s done. “To know the truth or live a long life in ignorant bliss? Not sure which is better.”

The bottle is offered and gratefully received by Castiel, the gravel and burnt-sugar taste slipping smoothly over his tongue; he might even call it pleasant.

“I’m still not clear on how that ends in piracy though?” Castiel says, licking the last dribble of dark liquid from his lips as Dean pulls the bottle away.

Dean sits with one arm slung over the back of his chair, the other hand grips the neck of the rum bottle which dangles in the space between his thighs. Castiel tries not to look directly at it, but his eyes do not want to obey.

“Well it was Samuel you see, our thankfully departed grandpa, he blamed John for Mary’s death because John was the one they wanted to get rid of. He’d found out something he wasn’t supposed to find, something dangerous.”

“Then these men are to blame, not your father. I can’t believe Captain Campbell wouldn’t be able to see that. The man that I know… knew,” he corrects, “wasn’t the sort to make hasty decisions.”

“Oh he knew alright,” Dean nods. “But he couldn’t handle Mary’s death and they got to him. Made him a deal that if he helped to keep John quiet they’d help him, they’d give Mary back to him… in a way.”
“The ship.” It’s the only logical conclusion. “The Lady Mary, and his captaincy. They were a pay-off for bringing in John Winchester?”

Dean nods. “Samuel spread it around that John murdered Mary, that he’d set the fire himself. You know what it’s like out there in the world, didn’t take long for rumour to be taken as fact. By the time the warrant had been issued for his arrest, he’d seen which way the wind was blowing, so he took me and Sam, and a few of his crew that he trusted, and went to sea.”

“He ran all the way to the Black Impala,” Castiel says.

Dean jabs a finger at him. “You got it, navy-man. As privateers they already had the skills, and as far as the law was concerned he was already a criminal, so why not piracy?”

“And this is how you were raised? Aboard this ship?”

Dean leans close as he offers the bottle again, which Castiel gratefully accepts; as rum goes it is fairly pleasant. There is quiet as Castiel drinks, nothing but the wet glug of the bottle and the sound of tick of his swallowing.

“We did spend some time with relatives in New England. Sam liked it there, he stayed for a while. That’s how he got the idea in his head to join the navy, thought he had to prove some kind of point about the right way to do things…”

“Didn’t work out very well did it,” Castiel says. He knows the story.

“No, not so well.” Dean laughs again, more open now there is alcohol burning through his veins. “But that’s a story for another time,” he says, turning to settle the bottle on the corner of the map-table. “All you need to know right now is that my Dad, he never attacked a ship without good reason. He wasn’t in it for the money, though there’s no denying it helped. It was the corruption in the fleet he was trying to fight, trying to get to the ringleaders and find the people who ordered our house burnt.”

“The people who killed your mother?”

Dean nods slowly, green eyes sparkle with a deceptive warmth. “That’s right,” he says. “I’m not saying John was a total innocent, he had his share of blood on his hands like anyone in this kind of life, but the charges that Samuel had him strung up for…”

“…Were a lie,” Castiel finishes.

He hardly knows what to think. The tale has the ring of truth to it but his senses are dulled by the rum, the heat of the room, and the persistent ache of his injuries. Dean has the look of an honest man, his face open, eyes bright, but he is still a pirate and he still has Castiel tied to an uncomfortable chair, and will probably still kill him in the end.

“You believe me,” Dean says. It isn’t a question and Dean smiles around the words.

He has read Castiel like an open-book, and if Castiel’s thinking was not so sluggish he would be ashamed to have let his guard down so much. But there is alcohol in his belly and Dean’s smile is warm and soft, and Castiel cannot bring himself to care too much since he will be dead soon anyway.

“It’s difficult to imagine we are talking about the same Samuel Campbell, but yes, I think I do believe you.”
Dean shifts forward in his chair to rest a hand on Castiel’s knee. “That’s a start,” he says. “You’ll find out the truth soon enough anyway. Everyone on board the Impala finds out the truth, whether they like it or not.”

“And are you going to teach me this truth?” Castiel asks. His gaze darting towards the stacked blades and away again, but not so fast that Dean does not notice.

Dean smiles again, pressing his other hand to Castiel left leg in a mirror of the right. “It’s not my truth to tell,” Dean says, sliding his hands up Castiel’s thighs in a slow movement that makes Castiel shiver. “There’s something about you that I like, Lieutenant Castiel Novak.” Dean rises from his chair but stoops to breathe the words into Castiel’s ear.

They are not touching but it is as if Dean’s tanned skin has held on to the rays of the sun, a delirious warmth that Castiel can feel through his clothes. If he were to turn his head, if he moved forward even an inch, they would be touching. That knowledge makes him dizzy, and for one crazy moment he wants to do it.

Instead, Castiel whispers into the space between them, his throat is dry and rasping. “It’s Cas,” he says. “You can call me Cas.”

He could really do with another good swig of rum right about now.

Dean pulls away, just far enough to look into Castiel’s eyes. “Hello, Cas,” he says, sliding his fingers along the edge of Castiel’s jaw. “I’m Dean Winchester, Captain of the Black Impala, wanted pirate and villain, and I was never going to kill you.” Dean’s hand slips up and back and his wicked fingers tangle and pull at Castiel’s hair in a way he never imagined could be so pleasurable. “In fact I’d really rather kiss you right now, if that’s okay with you, navy-man?”
Chapter 4

Castiel should protest. He should order Dean away, tell him he wants no part of what the pirate is offering. He should, but he does not. Instead, his breath hitches at the flash of Dean’s tongue as the pirate wets his lips in a glistening roll of pink flesh. Dean’s eyes darken as his gaze moves to focus on Castiel’s mouth, and Castiel is shocked to realise he has mirrored Dean’s actions; the damp patch cooling on Castiel’s mouth as he draws in a stuttering breath stands as evidence.

Castiel has no clue what is happening. He feels ill and wrongfooted, as confused and helpless as being set adrift on a storm tossed sea. His thoughts are treacherous and impossible to navigate.

Castiel should be repulsed by Dean’s actions, vulgar and unnatural as they are, not warmed by the attention, cheeks growing hot under Dean’s gaze. It must be shock, Castiel tells himself, or blood loss, or poison...

Perhaps the rum was poisoned?

it’s not beyond the realms of possibility. There are strange new discoveries coming out of the colonies everyday, a cure for every ailment, so why not an aphrodisiac?

“Why are you doing this?” Castiel growls, dragging the words out, heavy and hard like granite. “I can’t tell you what I don’t know, no matter what depravities you force on me.” A spark of arousal twists around Castiel’s spine at the thought of what ‘depravities’ Dean might be contemplating, and in that moment Castiel hates himself, hates the way his traitorous body warms in anticipation.

“Depravities?” Dean’s lips twitch at the corner as he struggles to suppress a smile. Castiel could not look away if his life depended on it. “Damn, and I had so many depravities planned.”

Dean leans in, breath warm and rum-spiced, and Castiel’s lips part instinctively, shamefully welcoming a kiss that does not come. A pang of disappointment ruthlessly ignored though it prods at Castiel’s core with boney fingers.

“I’m not asking you to tell me anything,” Dean drawls, breath flowing like hot silk over Castiel’s neck.

Surely he cannot be blamed for the way his eyelids flutter to a close. Rarely has Castiel been this close to another person, and never in this context. Castiel did not think it was something he needed, and certainly not wanted from the sources readily available to a sailor; rough crewmen, or the port-side whores that brazenly call out from windows above stinking streets, their wares already on display. The thought alone is enough to turn Castiel’s stomach. And this should not be any different, he tells himself. He sees what Dean wants from him. He knows he should shun it, should be revolted—the navy deals harshly when such unnatural transgressions are discovered, though they all know it goes on. Instead, Castiel’s skin tingles where Dean grips the span of his thigh, and his body aches in new and delicious with Dean’s close by.

It feels like madness; a nervous, endless feeling, like a boat caught endlessly at the crest of a wave in the desperate moment before it falls.

“I like you, Cas,” Dean whispers, each word scattering and sparking like lit gunpowder over Castiel’s skin. “And I have to say, you’re pretty hot all tied up like this. Makes me feel like I could do anything to you, anything I want.”

Dean drops a hand to the tented cloth of Castiel’s breeches. Embarrassment at the undeniable sign of
his arousal heats Castiel’s face, and when Dean brushes a finger over the fabric, Castiel cannot suppress a choked noise that gurgles in the back of his throat; it bears no resemblance to any kind of protest.

Dean hums in satisfaction as he sits back, and it is infuriating.

“Your ship is gone, and the navy will say you are among the dead.” He speaks in slow, clear words, looking into Castiel’s eyes with an intensity that holds Castiel captive more surely than any length of knotted rope. “There could be a place for you here, with us, if you want it?”

Castiel draws in a breath, trying to steady himself and clear his fogged-up mind. “As what?” he asks. “As your plaything?”

Dean looks up to the heavens as if he could see through the ornate panelling overhead. One eyebrow lifts and Dean squeezes his lips into a pout as if seriously considering the idea.

“Well if that’s what you want I’m going to say no, but I was thinking more along the lines of you joining the crew.” Dean grins and Castiel is utterly lost. His confusion must show, as Dean follows the offer with an unprompted explanation. “You’re well trained. You have skills we could use. And as I said, I like you.”

“But, why?”

Dean shakes his head. “I have no idea.”

Castiel’s heart pounds, and the rush of his blood is an ebb and flow to rival the sound of the ocean. When Dean closes his lips over Castiel’s there is no resistance.

For the first time Castiel lets the animalistic wants of his body take control; all good sense, any last scrap of gentlemanly decorum, is pushed aside as the pirate takes ownership of Castiel’s mouth, anointing him with warm licks and gentle bites that make Castiel’s toes curl inside his boots.

“And if you did happen to want more of this,” Dean says as he slides forward onto Castiel’s lap, straddling his thighs. “I wouldn’t have any objections.”

“I’d never…” Castiel starts, tapping into the last spark of resistance. But it’s a weak lie, and they both know it. He lets the protest float away like so much driftwood; no longer fit for purpose.

“In my experience ‘never’ doesn’t last,” Dean says. He slips a hand around the back of Castiel’s head and scratches at the short clipped hair with blunt fingernails, pulling Castiel forward to rest their foreheads together. “Life’s like the tide, always moving, always changing, what’s wrong today is right tomorrow, and right now… there’s nowhere else to go. So take some time,” Dean presses a lingering kiss to the side of Castiel’s mouth, “and think it over.” He taps a long index finger along the side of Castiel’s jaw. “Say you’ll think it over?” Dean’s eyes are wide, open and honest, as if he really means the ridiculous things he says.

“Yes,” Castiel gasps, wanting to believe it, if only for a moment. “Yes, I’ll think about it.”

A part of Castiel—the part that loves the navy and the King, order and the rule of law—clamours to be heard, railing against his weakness, against surrender to sin; but Dean pushes forward, attacking his mouth with exquisite fervour, and Castiel has no will to listen.

The sensuous slide of Dean’s tongue sends fire cascading through Castiel’s body, bursting like cannon-fire low in his belly as the pirate tilts his hips and moves in an undulating roll over Castiel’s crotch. Castiel jerks backwards at the unexpected sensation, cracking his tender skull against the high
back of the chair. The pain means nothing with Dean mouthing up the side of Castiel’s throat.

Castiel has gone mad.

It’s the only explanation. His heart pounds. His arms strain against their bindings. He’s too hot and too cold, shivering at the sweet heat and molasses of Dean’s mouth, more intoxicating than the liquor itself.

There are hands, Dean’s hands, pulling at Castiel’s uniform, making quick work of the buttons and pushing the blood splattered coat from his shoulders. It bunches up around Castiel’s elbows since his arms are pulled back. Dean finds skin, sliding up under Castiel’s shirt to trace over the muscle of his chest before the touch disappears, only to resurface in a maddening pressure against the hardness between Castiel’s legs.

He longs to feel Dean’s honeyed skin against his fingertips, to taste the salt on his skin, and trace the dark flame of the tattoo that circles over Dean’s heart.

“I want to touch…” Castiel pants against Dean’s mouth.

Dean drops a deliciously vicious bite to Castiel’s lip in return.

“You want to touch me, Cas? Want to put your hands on me?”

“Yes, God forgive me, I do.” He can feel the shape of Dean’s answering grin in his kiss, can feel it in the solid length of Dean’s pleasure each time he rocks forward.

The sudden loss of Dean’s hands is a tragedy that forces Castiel’s eyes open.

A sharp-edged blade catches the light glinting silver in Dean’s hand. All Castiel can do is stare dumbly, unable to grasp its meaning.

Where Dean had pulled the knife from in his half naked state the Lord only knows.

“We can do touching.” Dean’s breath comes in rapid gasps.

Castiel feels like he might die from the burst of arousal as Dean rolls his hips in one last decisive move that brings their erections fully together through thin cloth. It leaves Castiel light-headed and he does not notice Dean cutting his hand free of their ropes, until he feels the needle-sharp sting of blood rushing back into his flesh. Still, it’s a distant feeling, pushed to the edge of his consciousness. The world has narrowed to a vivid point, a single focus on the one thing his body craves. Adrenaline and lust add fuel to the blaze under his skin, a heat so fierce he could burn to ash and bone and not feel a second of regret.

With a grunt of effort Castiel shakes the coiled rope from his wrists. A lifetime at sea has made him strong, and it is nothing for Castiel to slide wide-palmed hands under the meat of Dean’s thighs, gripping and lifting, stumbling to his feet.

“Jesus Christ, Cas!” Dean gasps in surprise, but lets it happen.

He lets Castiel move them the few steps it takes to deposit him the edge of the table.

Now that Castiel has the freedom to do so, he drinks in the sight before him. Dean’s chest is smooth and relatively unmarked for a fighter, save for the inky stain of his strange tattoo. There are no gnarls of scar-tissue or the pale sheen of ill fixed stitches like common pirates wear. But then the Winchesters are not common pirates. The only blemishes on the taut sun-kissed skin are gritty red
abrasions over his knuckles and the trace of an old burn, a pirate brand, below his elbow.

The man looks like a God, Castiel’s very own Poseidon.

Castiel is unable to resist the temptation of pressing his mouth to Dean’s throat. His skin is salty and sweet. His hands take on a life of their own, exploring and searching out each curve and contour of Dean’s body, fingers shaking as they trace the hard bump of Dean’s nipples and feel the drag of the short hairs scattered there.

It’s good, good enough for Castiel to feel like he’s about to vibrate out of his skin, but he knows there could be more, and selfishly, dangerously, stupidly, he wants it all. He lets his hands slide underneath Dean’s arms, grasping desperately at his shoulders in order to drag him further down the table, hardly aware of what it is he’s trying to do.

Thankfully, Dean is a genius, and he wraps his legs around Castiel’s hips and arches up, pushing their erections together.

Castiel is delirious, near senseless as Dean moves against him, his perfect body warm and willing beneath Castiel’s fingers. He moves on base instinct alone as he rocks against Dean, answering each movement with one of his own, their cocks rubbing together in a frantic pattern that stutters and falters as the fire inside Castiel blazes and builds. It’s searing, burning the back of his eyelids in a bright flash of white.

Castiel comes with a muffled cry, pressing his face to Dean’s chest as his muscles contract and spasm, and he spills his shame inside his navy-issue breeches. Beneath him Dean hisses through his teeth, a faint, “Oh God,” from kiss-fattened lips before he stiffens and gasps with his own fall.

Castiel collapses as his senses return. With each breath he feels more grounded, more solid in his body. With each blink the situation becomes more real. His cheek is a sweaty press sticking to the skin over Dean’s ribs, and he can hear the pirate’s heart slowing, feel his body softening, the same as Castiel’s. The ache in Castiel’s head is thankfully gone. For a while all he can do is breathe in Dean’s scent, clean and honeyed compared to his own, soured with bitter ash and the rust of violence and defeat.

Between one moment and the next, Castiel’s reality snaps back into brutal focus. What has he done?

Warm satisfaction is swept away by a cold tide of shame. There is weakness in him that he never suspected; a handsome face and a few friendly words and Castiel’s frailty is revealed. He has fallen to the temptations of the flesh, to debauchery and fornication with a man, and not just any man, a known pirate and criminal. Castiel’s stomach churns with slow dawning horror and his eyes open to a new world.

Dean’s face is slack with comfort. His lips pulled up at one side in a soft and contented smile. It wounds Castiel to see how beautiful Dean looks lying against the dark wood of the table. But the flutter in Castiel’s chest is a betrayal, and he decides, there and then, he will not let the dissolute urges of his body dictate who he is in this life, or where his soul belongs in the next.

Dean Winchester has destroyed Lieutenant Castiel Novak, a knife in his chest could not have done a more complete job, and Castiel must stand firm against him.

Castiel’s gaze slides toward the weapons piled at the other side of the table, many are easily within reach.

“We should definitely do that again, huh?” Dean says. His eyelids droop in lazy satisfaction.
His guard is down. It’s the perfect moment to act.

Dean does little more than squint in confusion as Castiel peels himself away. The pirate even lifts a hand as a silent request for Castiel to pull him up. It plays to Castiel’s plan perfectly. He moves in as if to help, only darting to the side at the last second, to making a grab for a wide-bladed sword resting near the top of the piled weapons. A scimitar, heavy and wickedly curved towards a tapered point.

Dean’s eyes open wide as he realises what has happened, but it’s too late to do anything. He has made himself vulnerable. Castiel holds him away, the point of the sword pressing to the smooth dip of Dean’s throat, a place that Castiel knows makes him shudder when he flicks his tongue into it.

The pirate tries to speak, but Castiel has heard enough of his lies; he is the devil, peddling temptation to anyone who will listen, and Castiel will not be taken for a fool again, he will not sell his soul.

“Don’t speak.” He presses the sword further into Dean’s skin. “I don’t know what you did to me, but there’ll be no more. I’d rather die than live with pirates.”

The hurt that dims Dean’s eyes is just another lie to add to the growing collection, and when he tries to speak, to trick Castiel with his serpent’s tongue, there is no time to delay. Castiel swipes the solid hilt of the sword across Dean’s head, splitting the skin at his temple.

Dean blinks, wet-eyed and dazed.

He slumps against the table. “Cas..?” Dean whispers, voice fading as his head rolls and he falls back in an unconscious heap.

Triumph over his enemy should give Castiel satisfaction. It does not. But his choice is made, for better or worse. He’s a navy-man and will remain so until the day he dies—which is probably going to be soon, since pirates are not exactly known for taking attacks on their captain’s in their stride.

Castiel reaches for one of Dean’s discarded pistols and heads for the door, pressing his back to the wood and listening for movement outside. His gaze passes over Dean’s prone form, sprawled on the table half-naked. The years seem smoothed from his skin in slumber, and Castiel feels a stirring of regret.

For what? He doesn’t entirely know.

A knock on the door startles Castiel away from his dreary thoughts.

“Dean, you okay in there? I thought I heard something.” Sam Winchester is back. Castiel will have no choice but to try and fight his way out. “Dean?” Sam rattles the door, and Castiel has never been so glad for a turned key in his whole life.

He must move now, take his chance, or wait for Sam to break down the door.

Castiel breathes deep, bracing himself, and turns the great brass key.

“Thank God,” Sam starts as he ducks to steps over the threshold. With his head down, hair hanging over his eyes, Sam cannot see the empty chair or his injured brother. “I was starting to…”

He stops, looks up just in time to see dark wood swinging quickly towards him as Castiel pushes on the door with all his strength, slamming it into Sam’s nose. The pirate cries out in pain as he stumble back and Castiel takes the advantage to swing his sword hand, smashing the metal in his fist into Sam’s already injured face.
Sam’s knees buckle and Castiel does not wait to find out if he is really down, he flees down the corridor and pelts up the stairs, towards the main deck. Sam is big but Castiel is fast, and he makes the deck in quick-time and without incident. The sun is blinding as he emerges from below. He only has seconds to orientate himself and is poised for attack from any side.

There is a hazy plan forming in the back of Castiel’s mind; take a hostage, demand a boat, take supplies, kill any pirate who stands in his way.

He blinks the sun from his eyes and becomes vividly aware of the pirate crew all around. They stop in their tracks and stare, but no one approaches or shouts in alarm. It is more like confusion or mild curiosity.

Across the deck a dark-skinned man starts to laugh.

They are insane, the whole lot of them.

Castiel turns away, conscious that he is attracting more attention by the second, and clumsily hooks the nearest person within reach, wrapping an arm around their neck and dragging them towards him, a pistol pressed under their sharp little chin.

A boy. Not ideal, but nothing has been ideal since the moment the lookout on the Lady Mary called ship-ahoy.

“Hello, Lieutenant Novak,” the boy says.

Castiel feels the movement of the boy’s words against the muzzle of the gun, and damn it, he knows that voice--though it was terrified and tear-stained the last time he heard it.

“Blacklock?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, it’s me,” the boy replies, pleased and artless.

It’s true. Castiel knows it’s true but he must see for himself, check he is not suffering the same sea-madness as the pirates. He pushes the boy away, spinning him so they face each other, and sure enough there he is, young Matthias Blacklock, in the flesh and grinning broad enough to show a couple of shiny gold-teeth embedded in his grin.

“How are you here? I don’t understand…”

“Are you joining up too, Lieutenant?” Blacklock dashes on enthusiastically.

“Joining up? What…” Castiel stammers, struggling to understand or trust the evidence of his eyes.

Blacklock grins, puffing out his pigeon chest with pride and putting a hand on the pommel of a narrow blade that hangs from a leather strap at his side. The navy insignia have been cut from his uniform, his coat hanging open against regulation, to show the linen shirt beneath, which is loose at the neck since his tie is missing.

“Take to the sea or join them, that’s the choice isn’t it?” The boys shrugs. “When they explained what was happening in the navy, we had to help out, didn’t we?”

“So you…”

Blacklock grins wide. “We turned pirate.”

Castiel is standing with his mouth hanging open in utter astonishment when Sam finally makes it up
onto the deck, supporting Dean, who wobbles along beside him looking pale and unsteady. He wears Castiel’s parting gift in the blood slithering red down his face.

“Someone get a damn hold of him,” Sam orders. Blood gathered under his nose in two claggy blots that he has not quite managed to wipe away.

Castiel spins at a gentle tap on the shoulder, only to find he is facing the red-haired boy he fought with on the Lady Mary. Only now, she is a woman, long hair freed from the confines of her hat to spill around her shoulders in soft waves.

“Hello again,” she says, wiggling her fingers in a merry little dance in front of Castiel’s eyes. It is only as he feels the crack of a metal spar across the back of his skull that he realises she was trying to distract him, and it worked.
Chapter 5

Close-heat and stale sweat assault Castiel’s senses as he wakes. Something heavy and rough scratches against his chest as he starts to move, flexing his fingers and rolling his shoulders to ease the deep ache that can only come from prolonged sleep. There is an unaccountable softness at his back and he has to fight the temptation of falling back into the gentle dark of unconsciousness.

“You keep getting hit over the head like that, and one of these days you’re going to wake up dead, Lieutenant.”

Castiel starts at the voice close to his ear, but all he can do in response is try to drag open gritty and crusted eyes. He rubs feebly at them with the heels of his hands, but he cannot pull the fog from his vision. A familiar face looms over him out of the dark, flame-red hair hanging forward until Castiel can feel the ends tickling his chin.

“Hey, Lieutenant! Can you hear me?” she asks.

“Have you come to finish me off?” he asks, his voice as sour as the stink of the room. A burst of laughter is all he gets in reply. “I'll take that as a no then,” he grumbles.

He pulls his hand down over his face in an attempt to scrub the fuggy feeling from his skin. It does not work, and he realises why as he blinks into the gloom beyond the woman’s head. Castiel expected to wake up in the brig, with nothing but a bucket and the rats for company. He is not. He also is not shackled or restrained in any way. He’s in bed, covered with a thick woollen blanket, albeit one that smells distinctly, and unaccountably, of wet dog.

His injured hand has been carefully wrapped in clean cloth, and there is no burn of infection or poisoned blood, though it pulls stiff and uncomfortable as he moves his fingers.

Sparse lanterns hang from posts around the room, the bare wooden bones that drive up through every level of the Impala, waxy yellow light falling in small pools that barely penetrate the surrounding dark. They are somewhere in the middle of the ship, there are no windows, which makes sense given the lines of beds and the soft groans and sighs Castiel hears from the men around him; he’s in the infirmary.

“Pretty sure the captain would push me overboard if I so much as thought about it,” the woman is saying with a grin, when Castiel turns his attention back to her.

He makes a feeble attempt to sit up and is mortified when the woman has to help him, reaching out small, strong hands to steady him.

“Are you the surgeon?” he asks.

“Not likely,” she says, around a smile. “You can thank Chuck for the wrapping on that hand. He’s our barber-surgeon on the Impala. I’d have taken the whole arm off if it’d been up to me, can’t be too careful with gangrene can you?” She’s joking; at least Castiel hopes she’s joking. “I just thought I’d come check up on the patient, seeing as I had a hand in putting you here.”

A short, harassed looking man bustles over, his hair and beard both unkempt and looking very much as if he has only just woken up himself.

“You’re awake. Good,” he says, on a rush of relieved breath. “Dean’s been pestering me every hour since they brought you here.” He takes a breath, puts his hands on his hips uncovering a disturbingly
stained waxed-apron. “I’m Chuck, by the way, and you’re in the infirmary. I don’t know if Charlie here’s already told you?” Castiel shakes his head. “How are you feeling?” Chuck presses a hand to Castiel’s forehead. “Not overly warm, that’s good. Dean will be pleased.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Castiel says. “I have no secrets to tell. I thought I had made that obvious.” Chuck and Charlie exchange a look, Charlie sucking in her lips and pressing down—to keep from laughing, judging by the mirth lighting her eyes in the gloom—and Chuck colouring to as near to puce as is humanly possible. “I’m missing something…?”

“I don’t think it’s your secrets he’s interested in… unless that’s some new kind of slang?” Charlie says. Castiel waits for an explanation. Chuck, on the other hand, makes an uncomfortable noise and rushes off, kicking up puffs of dust from the sawdust strewn floor, to find a distant corner and another patient. “Wow,” she says at last. “You really don’t know, do you?”

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

“You and Dean are the talk of the ship.”

Heat creeps up Castiel’s neck.

“What about me and De… your captain?”

“No need to play it coy around here, Lieutenant McDreamy. Hate to be the one to break it to you, but rushing out on deck with half your clothes missing, your breeches undone, and one of the most dramatic post-coital glows I’ve ever seen lighting you up from the inside out, pretty much gave away what the two of you had been up to.” Castiel is speechless. He had not thought for a moment about what sort of picture he would present to the pirate crew. His only thought, short of a fairly large helping of regret and shame, was to escape or die trying. “And Dean, well... I think you must have some magic packed away in those breeches of yours, because I’ve never seen the captain take to anyone so fast. Wouldn’t let us dump you overboard for the fishes or anything.” She slumps back into a nearby chair, kicking her heels up onto the edge of Castiel’s bed. She crosses her arms. “He actually ordered Chuck to make sure you lived.” She looks down at him, as if she might be able to see through his skin to the truth hidden inside. “He flat out denied that you’d done anything to him. Said he’d fallen and hit his head and you’d just taken the obvious opportunity to escape.”

“He did?”

She gives him a good natured shove on his shoulder. “Sure did,” she says, “And we all know it’s total bull-crap. So yeah, there’s definitely a ‘you and Dean’ and the whole damn ship knows about it.”

“Everyone knows,” he repeats. “Oh God, everyone knows.” The hot flood of shame that follows makes him dizzy. Castiel presses his hands to the side of his dipped head to stop the room spinning but it doesn’t help. He feels ill. “God forgive me. I didn’t know how weak I was, how open to sin.”

“Now, now.” Charlie pats his arm in an attempt at comfort. The gold chains around her wrists jingle with incongruous music as she moves. “What’s life without a bit of sin every now and then, huh? None of us idiots on the Impala care about that sort of thing—we’re pirates! We do what we want, with who we want, whenever we want.” She sounds proud.

It strikes Castiel as strange for a young lady to be boastful of such a thing. He wonders if she perhaps experienced some terrible trauma as a child—it might explain why she likes hitting people over the head so much.
“Though I think most of us prefer to keep it behind closed cabin doors, less public nudity in general.” She leans down to look him in the eye. “Lieutenant, we may be pirates, but we’re free. Free from petty rules and false morality that makes men hate each other. We’re free to live and love in any way we want.” She pats him on the cheek as if soothing a child. “Don’t be afraid to give it a go. Who knows, you might like it.”

He pushes her hand away, not roughly, but firm enough to show his disbelief.

“I don’t need lessons in life from a pirate. You call it freedom, some would call it depravity.”

She shrugs off his frown.

“Suit yourself,” she says. “But you’re stuck with us for a while anyway, and you know what they say; stranger things have happen at sea.” She wiggles her eyebrows and leaves without another word, trailing the metal clang of jewelry and knives behind her, a fitting soundtrack for a pirate.

For two days Chuck keeps Castiel confined to the infirmary, “just to be sure,” or so he says. A more likely explanation is that they have not decided what to do with him yet. Regardless of Charlie’s words, there is no doubt in Castiel’s mind that he will pay for his attack on the captain, one way or another.

By the third day in the languorous dark Castiel’s patience has run out. He will go mad if he lies in the muggy heat any longer, with nothing to do but listen to the groans and farts of the other injured men. The question of punishment grows, looming large, like a shadow spreading over his mind: how will Dean Winchester retaliate for his humiliation? It’s with equal parts relief and apprehension that he tolerates Chuck’s hand on his brow, a last squinting check of the healing wound on the back of his hand, and finally, Chuck’s nod of all-clear that releases Castiel from the infirmary.

“I’m pretty sure you’ll live, for now,” Chuck mumbles as he ushers Castiel towards the door. He shoves a pile of clothes into Castiel’s hands as he goes. They are stiff but smell clean, which is a definite step up from the wet-dog blanket.

“What am I supposed do?” Castiel asks, as Chuck makes a valiant effort to disappear into the miasma of waxy-smoke, copper, and the acrid poultices the surgeon favours. Castiel is still a prisoner, an enemy combatant with no prison cell to return to. He finds the lack of proper protocol unnerving.

“Captain’s sending someone to take you up top,” Chuck tells him. “Best get those clothes on before they arrive, the crew have seen quite enough of you already.”

Castiel is pushed out the door which closes decisively at his back.

He dresses in near darkness, nothing but the thinnest sheen of sunlight creeping in around the hatch at the top of the stair. The cloth feels familiar under his fingertips, a good linen shirt to pull over his head, a waistcoat cut so close it could have been made for him, and finally a heavy coat decorated with thick cord around the buttons. It is a pattern so familiar he feels stupid for not realising sooner; his own clothes have been returned to him, cleaned and patched, with the rough scars of clumsy stitches skirting his cuff. Some buttons have been lost, failing to make it through the recent adventures with him, so he lets the coat hang open from his shoulders, trying hard to ignore the discordant pull at the back of his mind that censures him for not keeping to navy-standard dress.

“Lieutenant Novak!” The call comes as the hatchway bangs open.

More light than Castiel has seen in days, that felt like months, comes tumbling over the stair. A quick patter of boots later, Castiel is wrapped in a bear-hug that leaves him wheezing from the heavy-
handed slaps landing between his shoulder blades. He wishes he had his sword or his pistol, but unarmed and taken by surprise there is little he can do but endure it.

“It’s me, Lieutenant! Midshipman Bryant,” the pirate says with a grin, before adding in a concerned tone, “Don’t you know me?”

All Castiel can do is frown until his sight sharpens enough to confirm that, yes, it does seem to be the familiar shape of the midshipman standing before him. “Mr Bryant I hardly recognise you. You look very… alive.”

He looks like he’s wearing a disguise, or a costume; the kind of thing someone might wear when acting the role of pirate in an entertainment. A scarlet sash circles his belly and a hat crested with large brown feathers wobbles atop his head as he chuckles.

“That I am, Sir. Alive and better than ever. The captain sent me to fetch you and show you about a bit.”

“Why?” Castiel asks. He cannot see how it would be of any benefit to the pirates to have him know the layout of the ship. He has already seen more than he would ever allow a navy prisoner. Castiel can only guess that it’s another ploy to keep him off guard, but if so, it’s a very strange one.

“I guess he thought you’d be more at ease with someone you know,” Bryant says, standing aside to ushering Castiel up the steps to the main deck.

“No. I mean why does he want me to see the ship?”

“He wants you to join us, and the rest of us from the Mary put in a good word for you after what happened with the…” He waves a hand at the crown of his head and nods knowingly as if Castiel is supposed to understand. “You should do it. This ship, these people, they aren’t what we thought they were.”

“They aren’t pirates?” Castiel gets another big-pawed slap on the shoulder as they emerge, aft of the fo’c’sle.

“Well yes, we’re pirates, but not the bad kind.”

“There’s a good kind of pirate?” Castiel scoffs.

Bryant looks at him so earnestly it nearly makes Castiel’s eyes water.

“Yes. I know, I was just as surprised as you. But, Lieutenant, you were out cold and you didn’t see what happened on the Mary before they sent her down. Some of the men…” he shudders, “they weren’t right. And they were there all along, right among us, right next to us everyday, talking and whispering and spreading lies, and we couldn’t see it. The Winchesters showed us the truth, and I just couldn’t go back to the navy after that could I? Not until the rot’s been cleaned right out.”

“What truth, Mr Bryant?” Castiel stands there, frustrated, confused and more than a little offended by this account of the Lady Mary and the implication of the navy being complicit in some unspecified corruption. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Bryant looks almost as confused as Castiel at the challenge. “The evil, Lieutenant. The evil that’s infected the navy. Captain Campbell, he knew all about it but didn’t do a thing. Surely the captain told you about it?”

“I think you’ve been listening to too many stories, Mr Bryant. Pirates lie. This is superstitious
nonsense designed to get you on their side.”

“If you’d seen it, Lieutenant, what happened when they took those men below, you’d be as convinced as I am.”

“Then tell me exactly what you saw?” Castiel demands.

“Those men, when the captain touched them their eyes shone black like Indian ink. That’s how they know, you see, that’s how they know the bad ones. And when they took them below, there was an almighty howl, like nothing I’ve ever heard before or ever wish to hear again, and then there were flashes of light and billows of smoke darker and thicker than night, that looked like it was given will of its own to climb up out of the cargo hold.” He pushes back the brim of his oversized hat with the tip of a finger, looking at Castiel with nothing but honesty in his face. “I never dreamt of such things, Lieutenant. But now that I know, how could I do anything but help?”

It’s quite a story. But Castiel can more easily believe that the Winchesters have taken advantage of the midshipman’s weakness of mind, than in the reality of such tales; stories that turn pirates into heroes and the navy into villains. To accept it would be to turn the world upside down. It’s far more likely that the pirates murdered the men in some brutal way before setting fire to the lower decks. Castiel holds his tongue for now. Bryant has been convinced, has been turned. He has willingly taken on the mantle of pirate, and although he comes to Castiel in the guise of a friend, Bryant can no longer be trusted.

“Come along Lieutenant Novak,” Bryant says with a grin, happy to let the conversation die on its own. “I don’t think you’ll be disappointed with the Impala, she’s a real beauty.”

Castiel turns towards the stern and gets his first real look over the mighty Black Impala.

As much as it pains Castiel to acknowledge it she is indeed a terrible beauty; a grand old dame wearing her years as experience rather than dilapidation.

“How many men does she take to sail?” Castiel asks, absently running a hand along the smooth ebony inlay that runs along the rail above the gunports. A good ship can carry a lot of men, but a great ship can be sailed by just a few. At sea things change in a moment; a storm, a fight, an outbreak of fever, any can decimate a crew in a matter of days, and any ship that cannot be sailed by those left standing becomes a death trap.

“Twenty or so for easy sailing, maybe fifteen if the men are up to the challenge.” Bryant leads Castiel across the deck, dodging crew who alternately jeer or call out in welcome. “More than the Mary, but good for a ship of her age and size.”

“That is good,” he says absently, “and how many crew?”

“I’m told it changes, but around a hundred and twenty right now with the others from the Mary.”

The casual comment stops Castiel in his tracks. “Just how many of the Lady Mary’s crew are here?”

The disappointment in Castiel’s tone is unmistakable and Bryant looks away, down at the worn boards under his feet. “I’d say about thirty.”

Castiel snaps his jaw shut and turns away to look out over the portside gunwhale, where morning light sparkles as it catches the tips of rolling waves. What can Castiel say to the knowledge that so many of the crew, his crew, loyal men that Castiel would have died for in a heartbeat, have been so easily swayed to villainy. Nothing can ease the betrayal. He feels it keenly and knows it will linger like a cut from a poisoned blade, festering quietly in his blood.
“Just give me a moment,” Castiel says when Bryant tries to encourage him on.

The sudden change in atmosphere sends the midshipman retreating moments later.

“You take your time to look around, Lieutenant,” he says. “No one will bother you so long as you keep out of the way,” and he departs with promises of water and victuals hanging in the air behind him.

If the weather holds it will be a good day’s sailing. Traces of cloud gather in grey snarls on the horizon but they are a long way off and behind the ship. The Impala should easily stay ahead of the storm as she scuds along, canvas sails billowing overhead, embracing the quick sea breeze that drives them along. She cuts through the ocean like a knife, smooth and arrow straight. Castiel hates to admit it, but although heavy warships have fallen out of fashion in favour of lighter, faster vessels, the Impala is magnificent. It’s a shame she has been repurposed to serve the pirates.

“I’m glad to see you out and about at last, Lieutenant,” a young voice forces Castiel to turn back towards the deck and the peering faces of the sailors.

“Thank you, Mr Blacklock. I am quite well recovered.”

The boy is anchoring a rope attached to the yard arm while another crewman clambers about in the rigging, intent on making the last repairs from the Impala’s encounter with the Lady Mary.

Castiel hardly knows what to say, his thoughts are dreary and unfit for sharing. “Do you like being a pirate?” is what he eventually comes up with.

“Very much, Sir,” Blacklock grins. “I never did want to say anything, but some of the crewmen on the Lady Mary didn’t always treat us right, Sir.”

Castiel is shocked to hear it, he always made it abundantly clear that all fellow sailors were to be treated with fairness and respect, whether they were of high station or low. “They didn’t?”

“Oh not you, Sir, or Captain Campbell,” Blacklock says, misunderstanding his surprise. “It was the rotten ones that liked to push us around. I lost count of the number of times Scottie got the lash for nothing at all. But they’ve gone now, thanks to the captain.”

“If there was bullying, you should have said something. I’d never have allowed such a thing if I had known.”

Blacklock waves it off with a flap of his hand, almost losing his grip on the rope coiled around his waist in the process. There is an angry shout from up in the rigging.

“Couldn’t do it, Sir. None of us knew who to trust. We didn’t want to tell the wrong person and end up worse off than before. But Captain Winchester,” Blacklock says the name with the kind of reverence that should be reserved for the heroes of legend, not a black-hearted pirate. “He knows what’s what, and who’s who, and he doesn’t let any of the rotten ones on the Impala. So, yes, it’s better for us here, and if you’ll pardon me, Sir, I think it’ll be better for you as well.”

“I’ll think about it,” Castiel says, without any intention of doing so. For some reason he doesn’t have the heart to disappoint the young sailor.

“Good,” says Blacklock, “That’s good... And you know there are women on board as well?”

“I’m aware,” Castiel says, and has to forcibly stop himself from rubbing the back of his head when it aches.
“Oh yes, of course,” Blacklock laughs. “But it isn’t just Charlie, there’s Tamara over there,” he says, pointing to a figure hanging daringly from the bowsprit. “Ezra looks after the provisions, and Tracy is a master gunner, she’ll be down below making sure the cannons are ready for action.” The boy has stars in his eyes and a tinge of pink high on his cheeks, and Castiel can barely keep from rolling his eyes. This is exactly why the navy do not allow women on board; the men act like idiots. “And that’s just a few of them.”

“And the men don’t mind having women on the ship?” he asks, honestly curious. On the Lady Mary some of the crew would kick up a stink just at the idea of a woman visiting while they were docked.

“Not at all. Captain says so long as they can do the job, they got just as much right to sail, and to kill some evil sons-of-bitches, as anyone.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Castiel grudgingly admits.

“It seems funny now that I was so scared of the pirates,” Blacklock says. “But then again, he’s not exactly what you’d expect is he, Captain Winchester, I mean?”

“No.” Castiel says. “He’s not really what you’d expect.”

“Are you guys gossiping about me?” Someone says, coming up behind Castiel. It makes him jump, and he spins around with his heart wedged firmly in his throat to find himself face-to-face with the very person they were talking about. “I thought I could feel my ears burning,” Dean says.
Castiel can feel heat creeping up towards his cheeks as he lifts his eyes to meet Dean’s. Some part of him was hoping that the captain was as keen to avoid him, after the failed escape attempt, as Castiel was to avoid the captain. A warm hand on his shoulder and the soft words that guide Castiel away from the safety of Blacklock’s company, prove Castiel’s hope to be entirely false.

“So what do you think of my old lady?” Dean asks, sweeping his arm out across the deck in a grand fashion. “She’s something, huh?”

“It seems a very solid and reliable ship,” Castiel says, addressing his shoes, finding it increasingly difficult to hold Dean’s gaze.

“I think we can do better than that,” Dean says. “Let me show you the quarterdeck, you’ll get a better view from there.” Again a hand lands on Castiel’s shoulder, fingers squeezing slightly, and he cannot help but be reminded of the last time Dean put his hands on him. “Mr Singer helps navigate and is usually at the wheel,” Dean is saying as he steers Castiel smoothly around the thick root of the main mast. “Sam usually hangs about up there as well, when he’s not in his cabin with his books and maps. Did Bryant show you around below deck?”

“No,” he says with an edge of panic in his voice. “No... I’d rather stay on deck. Thank you.” The last thing Castiel needs is to be alone with Dean. “I’ve spent enough time down in the infirmary already.”

“I get that,” Dean says.

He sounds casual enough, but when Castiel glances up there is a glint of mischief in Dean’s eye. It is small comfort to Castiel that Dean clearly does not hold a grudge against him. Dean is relaxed, completely unconcerned by their proximity. It makes sense really. Captain Winchester probably makes conquests of many of his captives. He is a fine looking man who does not lack experience, or the ability to attract willing partners. What happened between them was completely new and extraordinarily shameful for Castiel, but to Dean it was likely nothing more than a momentary diversion, a release of tension after a fight and a triumph.

“What happened to the men who didn’t join you?” Castiel asks suddenly; the words come out harder than he intended, but there is blood and battle in the memory, and it is still raw.

Dean turns to him, blinking in surprise at the turn of the conversation, but he gives Castiel his full attention nonetheless.

“They were given a choice to join us or take their chances at sea,” he shrugs, moving to look over the gunwale at the frothing trail the Impala leaves as she dives through the water. The scent of salt and seaweed is strong where the rudder churns the waves. “We always give the crew of the ships we take a choice, though there aren’t often many left to make it.” His face is turned away to the north and all Castiel can see of him is the downturned line of his mouth.

“Were there many from the Lady Mary?”

“Enough to fill the launch. We gave them supplies. It shouldn’t be too hard for experienced sailors to find land from where we left them.”

“I hope you’re right.”
Dean raises a finger but does not turn back. “One minute, Cas…”

Something has Dean transfixed, but for all Castiel’s squinting into the distance he sees nothing but a small pod of whales off to starboard, dark giants blasting sprays of water into the air as they surface. They are no threat, no more than the cloud bank building to stern.

“I don’t see anything.” Castiel watches Dean fumble for the spyglass at his hip. Dean’s reply is a decisive shushing. Castiel snaps his jaw shut and turns away, perhaps Dean is not so over their inappropriate tryst.

“I think there’s something… Damn it!” Dean goes from quiet consideration to battle-ready in less time than it takes for Castiel to blink, and wonder what the hell is going on. Dean pushes away from the gunwale shouting, “Blacklock, I need you here, now!”

“Aye, Captain!” The boy comes running.

“I need young eyes for this. What do you see in the cloud?” Dean demands as he pushes the spyglass into Blacklock’s hands, as the boy hurries to oblige his new captain. “Look close.”

“Nothing, Captain. It’s just cloud,” Blacklock says, “There’s nothing.”

Dean’s face relaxes, head bowed in relief.

Blacklock fiddles with the glass, blinking rapidly before raising it to his eye and peering once more towards the horizon. “Wait…” he says, slowly. “I think that’s…”

The clang of the look-out’s bell cuts Blacklock off, and there is a cry of, “ship a-hoy! Ship a-hoy! Ship to stern!” that seems to bounce around growing louder with every repetition.

“Give that to me, idiot,” Dean snaps, snatching the spyglass back from Blacklock’s shaking hands.

“I’m sorry, Captain. The cloud… It was hard to see…” All Blacklock gets is ignored. Castiel gives him a good natured pat on the shoulder and sends him on his way.

“Damn, shit, fuck…” Dean spits words into grey waters below.

Unable to stand the suspense Castiel has to ask, “Who is it..?”

Dean ignores him to cross the deck at a run, yelling at the men to get out of his way. He leans far out over the gunwale, so far his feet lift alarmingly from the ground, and Castiel instinctively reaches for him, gripping the back of his fine green coat so that he does not end up overboard in his panic.

“Rufus!” Dean shouts to the carpenter Castiel can see perched on an improvised seat near the waterline. “Is she patched enough to make full-sail?”

A grizzled grey head lifts, gold earring catching the sun as the man looks up from checking the wedges that patch the cannonball holes in the Impala’s side. “Hold your horses, Winchester, the girl ain’t as young as she used to be,” Rufus grumbles, patting the dark hull affectionately.

“No time, Rufus. The Red Queen’s on our tail, we need to move, now!”

The worried look that crosses Rufus’s face is enough to wake fear and make it beat it’s wings in Castiel’s chest. What in all the world could make a salt-toughened old pirate look like that? Rufus is yelling at his assistants and hauling himself back on to the deck before Castiel has time to consider the answer.
“She’ll let in water,” he says, standing straight and serious in front of his captain. “And she’ll let it in faster than I’d like, but she’ll sail.”

“Good, I’ll send some of the new men down to bail. They’ll be no use up here anyway,” Dean says and turns away.

With the next breath he’s shouting to the crew, ordering them to set-sail, to catch the growing wind and move away from the approaching ship, the threat that Castiel still cannot even see in the distance.

“Who do you think it is, Captain Winchester?” Castiel demands again, drawing Dean’s surprised attention back to him.

Dean blinks as if he had forgotten Castiel was there, albeit that his hand is still twisted in the back of Dean’s coat, bringing them close together. He drops the cloth as if the velvet might burn his fingers. Before Dean can answer, a shout tumbles down from the crow’s nest.

“The Red Queen! It’s the Red Queen, and she’s closing fast!”

Dean sucks in a breath and lifts his head, face hard, eyes sharp. In a heartbeat he becomes the captain the stories talk about.

“Battle stations,” Dean calls out in a command as serious as the rolling ocean beneath their feet. “Get everyone into position, Mr Singer.” Dean spins and points to the old man up by the wheel.

“Aye-aye, Captain,” the old man shouts back. He jerks his head in acknowledgement before charging off at a pace that belies the years carved like crevices into his skin.

“Who is it?” Castiel asks again.

This time he will not be ignored. He catches Dean’s elbow before he can move on, and the look that is turned upon him, the fury in Dean’s wild green eyes, makes Castiel take step back. For a moment he fears that the time for his punishment has finally come, and the panicked looks of the crew do nothing to still his worries. “Who’s ship is it?” Castiel repeats, with less force this time.

“You’ve never heard of Captain Sands?”

Castiel can’t be blamed for his response. “Josie Sands, the pirate queen? She isn’t real!” he scoffs. “It’s an old children’s story. You can’t be serious. You’re making fun of me...” Castiel would be willing to go along with the joke if the crew’s panic and fear were not so tangible. The space between the Impala’s masts is thick with it, the air warm and choking, the men wheezing as if their lungs were filled with saltwater.

The green of Dean’s eyes so razor sharp that they could cut into Castiel if he stood any closer. “You think I would joke about this?”

“If the pirate queen were real, she’d be ancient by now. A hundred years old at least”

“Look around you, Lieutenant,” Dean says, nodding to the crewmen running to clear the decks, gunners rolling cannon into position, or heaving shot and powder through the hatchways from the lower decks. “You think my crew would be preparing to attack a story? You think we need to load the twelve-pounders to defend ourselves against a myth?” He cannot argue. The fear is very real, no matter what the threat might be, and any further arguments pushing their way to the tip of Castiel’s tongue, fall away, to be forgotten.

All across the ship there is nothing but activity, voices raised, orders swirling overhead and
underfoot, a litany of posts and jobs and places for each crewman to be. Their movements are fascinating, louder but more organised than Castiel would have expected. It is a controlled kind of chaos that sees them battle-ready in a matter of minutes; a navy ship could not have performed better. Castiel moves from Dean’s side to get a better look, caught up in following the movements of the men.

It proves to be a mistake. Two steps and Castiel is hit by the barrelling mass of Mr Singer while he shouts at riggers in the spider’s web of ropes around the sails.

“What’re you thinking, boy!” is growled before Castiel’s is being pushed out of the way.

He spins with the force of it, trying to stay on his feet—the old man, wiry with muscle, is stronger than he looks—only to collide with the solid form of Sam Winchester. Castiel’s ends up shoved face first into the tall man’s chest for an embarrassing moment, before sturdy hands are on his arms and setting him back on his feet.

There are hasty apologies but Sam brushes them off with a shrug and a smile that looks more like a grimace. It’s Dean that is frowning in annoyance, his hands tight on Castiel’s arms.

“I’ll stay out of the way,” Castiel promises.

He does not get far from Dean’s side before he’s being hauled back again. This time, out of the way of one of the gunners pelting towards the swivel cannon at the corner of the quarterdeck.

Dean gives him a hard look. “Stay below deck until this is over,” he orders. “Do you understand me?” The command is unexpected and any argument dies before it reaches Castiel’s lips.”Do. You. Hear. Me?” Dean says again, each word coming like a punch, hard enough to bruise.

Castiel stares, confused. “Why?”

Instead of an answer a growl rumbles from Dean’s throat, and Castiel’s breath catches as a thrilling tremor of fear zips through his body.

“I’ll take him,” Sam offers, placing a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I’ll make sure he’s safe.”

“The last thing I need is the protection of pirates,” Castiel says. He’s being ungenerous but Dean’s order is a challenge to his honour, to his willingness and ability to fight. “I’m your prisoner, not your guest.” Castiel will not hide while others die. “And I’m certainly not afraid of any mythical dangers you can invent.”

Sam makes a whistling noise, sucking in a breath as he shakes his head in a warning that comes too late judging by the dark look on covers Dean’s face. “Well remembered, Cas,” Dean says. “You are our prisoner, and you’ll do exactly what I say.”

He steps in close, curling a hand in Castiel’s linen shirt where it lies over a rapidly beating heart. With a gentle tug Dean draws him closer, so close Castiel can feel breath on his skin. In a daze Castiel nods his assent. He cannot look away from the hard shine of Dean’s eyes.

“Good,” Dean says, relaxing back into a familiar smirk. “Glad we understand each other.”

Giving up the fight as lost, Castiel turns to follow Sam through the throng of sailors crowding the deck.

“Just one last thing,” Dean calls out, and then he’s there, in Castiel’s space, a warm hand turning him before sliding around to cup the back of his neck. Soft lips that feel like heaven are pressed to his in a
fleeting touch. “Stay safe,” Dean breathes the words, barely more than a whisper, and then he’s gone, disappearing among the crewmen so fast that Castiel is left to wonder if the moment really happened at all.
Chapter 7

Sam tugs Castiel’s arm to get him moving, with a completely unsympathetic grunt of, “Come on,” while Castiel tries to remember how to walk, how to speak, how to do anything other than stare at the place where Dean disappeared into the crowd, leaving his kiss lingering like a phantom behind him. The slack-jawed expression on Castiel’s face gets nothing but a roll of Sam’s eyes before he is being dragged towards an open hatchway, stumbling over his feet in the climb down the ladder and away from the action on deck.

Words are rare from Sam during the journey. He is not rough with Castiel but it is clear his attitude has changed since the half-hearted attempt at interrogation. When Sam does speak his comments are clipped and short. There is a tightness to Sam’s expression that Castiel cannot fail to notice, skin pulled into lines at the corner of his eye in a way that ages, making him look more careworn than someone of his years should be.

The path into the belly of the ship leads through narrow passages where frantic sailors run by, loaded down with fresh shot and powder from the dry store.

“Where are you taking me?” Castiel asks when the silence stretches too long.

They are somewhere aft of the main mast if Castiel’s sense of direction has not abandoned him. The noise from the deck is muffled, overpowered by the splash and rush of water against the skin of the ship. They are close to the water line, maybe even below it.

“Somewhere safe,” Sam mutters, without looking at Castiel.

Sam’s refusal to engage is not a good sign, and Castiel has a moment of revelation.

“You’re going to put me behind bars at last.”

It was always going to happen. No matter that Castiel’s weakness to temptation has been so easily exposed, he has been clear from the start; he will not cooperate with pirates.

The air grows heavy, pressure building the lower they go. Battle preparations are nothing but a distant echo of movement — more like the memory of action, than the real thing. Store rooms and passages grow dark, and eventually Sam takes a lantern from a rusted hook to light their path.

Castiel watches the light fall like water over dark wood and flaking iron, picking out rough carvings scattered over the beams; the evidence of dozens of sailors compelled to score their presence into the ship, a small way to say, ‘I was here, I lived.’ It may be the only memorial many of them have. Perhaps Castiel will do the same, score something of himself into his prison while he still can.

“You’ll be safe in here,” Sam says, opening a heavy door into the dark space of the brig.

A series of small cells lines one side of the passageway. They are little more than cages, thick chains securing doors that are functional and featureless but for the square of a metal grille cut into the top half. Further on, the brig falls into tar-black darkness.

“Yes, I’m sure I will be,” Castiel replies, each word dripping with sarcasm.

Perhaps this is better? As a prisoner he least knows what to expect, and what is expected of him.

“You’ll stay in here.” Sam rattles the fat bunch of keys that hang from his belt on a large metal ring.
The ceiling is low, barely a handspan above Castiel’s head, and it forces Sam to hunch his shoulders as he sorts through the keys with quick flicks of his long fingers, searching for the right one. When he finds it, Sam smiles absently at Castiel in celebration of the small triumph, before remembering himself and schooling his expression into grim determination.

The door opens to reveal a typical cell, its only contents a narrow wooden cot, a blanket that looks very much like it had a former life as a potato sack, a small bucket, and the cockroaches skittering into the damp shadows where mould blooms, smeared like dirty handprints in the corners.

“Get in,” Sam grunts, as the salt-rusted hinges grind open in a shower of red flecks.

Despite the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Castiel lifts his head, pointedly straightens his coat and cuffs, fastening the brass buttons as if he is strapping on armor. He has lived his life as a navy-man, he will stay a navy-man until the day he dies, and throwing him into the brig changes nothing.

Even if the Winchester’s claim about the navy were true — which it cannot be — a few bad eggs do not necessarily spoil the whole clutch. If some bad characters have inveigled their way into commissions it does not take away the good work or the good men than remain.

“You’ll be safe here,” Sam says again. He squints at Castiel through the gloom, eyes sharp. “Stay here, stay quiet, and you better hope like hell we can outrun the Red Queen.” Sam’s eye squeeze into slits as he considers his prisoner, and Castiel feels pinned down by it. “She hates us, but I dread to think what her crew would do with a navy Lieutenant. Though after what you did to my brother,” he adds slowly, tilting his head as if weighing each word, “I think I might be okay with it.”

“It’s my duty to try and get back to naval command…” Castiel starts to explain.

Sam holds up a wide-palmed hand, the other holds the candle stub he used on the lamp that hangs outside the door casting a pitiful light.

“Don’t bother. I already know the drill. I was navy once too, remember? Fact is Dean does not need distractions right now.”

“I have no intention of distracting anyone,” Castiel says in his own defence. “I just wanted to save my men and return to the navy.”

Sam’s frown cannot mean anything good. “So you admit you were just playing with my brother?”

“That’s not what I meant.” He is more than a little shocked at the accusation.

“Well you had me fooled, Lieutenant,” Sam says, darkly. “Never thought a stand-up guy like you would stoop to seduction to escape.” There is disgust in Sam’s voice.

“Seduction?” Castiel splutters. “I never… How could… It’s not…” The accusation sends his mind into a spin, and he has to clear his throat and take a breath before he can speak; by then Sam has turned away. “That’s not what happened,” Castiel calls out, pressing his face against the cold metal of the grille, but all he sees is Sam’s back as he walks away. If Castiel’s words reach Sam above the brazen rush of waves against the Impala’s hull, there is no sign of it.

Castiel eases back from the grille, a resigned sigh whispering from his lips. Sandy flakes of iron oxide cling to his fingers, smears of russet that look like blood in the dribble of light from the lamp beyond the door. As his eyes adjust to the darkness Castiel makes his way to the wooden cot pushed against the back of the cell. The wall bows slightly as it moves up towards the ceiling, no doubt following the upward curve of the ship’s ribs.
He tries and fails to reconcile his present situation stuck in the dankest guts of the Impala, with the urgent thrill of Dean’s parting kiss. Some part of Castiel wants to believe that Dean did not order this, does not know he is here with the rats and the cockroaches and the air so thick with moisture each breath feels like drowning. He wants to believe that Sam abandoned him here for his own reasons and by his own volition, but it cannot be true; the captain should know everything that happens under his command, and Castiel cannot imagine Sam going purposefully against his brother’s wishes.

Another sigh tries to punch free from Castiel’s lungs as he droops, landing heavily on the bed. His chest is constricted, throat tight in the stifling air, with the stink of rotten fish and mould filling his nose until he can taste it on the back of his tongue.

In the gloom time stretches.

The lantern-light casts strange shadows across the walls that swelling and shrink with each roll and lurch of the ship. Castiel follows them, trying to quiet his mind and still his heart, until he is drifting, his mind going blank. It is a relief from the overpowering confusion, his constant companion since he awoke on the Impala. He is happy to forget about Dean Winchester and his strange and changeable nature, his fiery kisses and child-like superstitions: the man is a puzzle, one better forgotten than solved.

Down in the brig, far from the growing panic and fear of the crew, Castiel’s eyelids begin to droop and he welcomes the pull of sleep as it draws him under.

Castiel is jolted awake to the unmistakable sound of wood being ripped apart. The Impala judders, tilting as if she has been forced onto a reef. His arms and legs tangle in the tattered sheet and he flaps like a landed fish as the cot slides hastily across the floor. It takes a moment for Castiel to gather his wits and he finds he is now sitting on the floor with stagnant water seeping through the seat of his breeches, the cot is in pieces, heaped against the cell door like firewood.

The Impala had been running high and fast when Castiel drifted into sleep, picking up speed from the south wind curling across the Caribbean. Now she leans drunkenly, dragged down on the starboard side.

For one insane moment images of the Pirate Queen and her devil’s hoard flash through Castiel’s mind, visions from childhood, terrors whispered in stories told under candlelight in winter darkness; a ship decorated with bones, a queen swathed in scarlet to hide the bloodstains on her gown, lips dripping red with the blood of the men she kills.

He shakes the thoughts from his head. He must have hit his head when he fell to let himself become distracted by such childish things. There is no Josie Sands.

The unmistakable boom of cannon-fire rolls by, ending in the crash and scatter of seawater raining down as the shot goes wide.

Perhaps the navy is on the other side of the guns?

Hope dashes through Castiel’s thoughts. It lights him up with renewed purpose as he wriggles free from the debris, the rough sheet catching around his knees, making him stumble. He dusts himself down as best he can, dislodging dust and cruel-looking splinters that stick to his increasingly damp coat.

The Impala lurches, too hasty in her panic, too careless of direction and course as she tries to outrun the danger. Castiel grabs at the grille, holding on against the dramatic seesawing of the ship, trying to
give his feet time to make a solid and meaningful connection with the floor.

Another blast hits and she rocks violently. Castiel clings to the door to stay upright; and whether it’s the cannonade, stress on the aging bones of the ship, or a warning about Castiel’s weight will forever remain a mystery, but the door abruptly ruptures around it’s rusted hinges, and the whole hunk of wood comes free, threatening to squash him as gravity and the endless tilt of the ship conspire to end him. He twists awkwardly and scrambles out of the way as the door falls to the ground with an unremarkable and muffled splat.

The passage beyond the cell is still save for the wash of stale water over the boards and the swing shadows from the paltry light of the lamp, its single candle smoking and hiccuping behind cracked glass, the smell of warm tallow still pungent above the must of damp and rot. The lamp is easily removed from its peg and Castiel is thankful for it. He turns, intending to retread the path that brought him here, but something stops him, something that flickers strangely in the corner of his eye, tugging the edges of his awareness to draw him back.

He presses closer to the doorframe of his cell, lifting the lamp high. Dark patterns, scored deep, curve over the lintel; words that are not words; letters unlike anything Castiel has ever seen; some blackened with growths of mould, others fresh and pale against age-darkened timber. They have no meaning to him, but their emphatic presence clearly has meaning to someone.

He turns to leave as the ship is rocked again — the rolling thunder of cannon blasts getting closer, too close — but he feels a chill at his back, a shiver of icy breath on his neck, and he spins.

There is no one there, just darkness thick as tar, and an uneasy feeling in Castiel’s gut. A few steps forward and Castiel’s meager light reveals the end of the passage, marked by a heavy door, cast in iron, thick bolts holding it closed. A quick exploration shows the similar markings to the ones over the door of his cell, only more and bigger and laid out in an organised way; they are oddly beautiful, the strange markings, and Castiel feels a need to know what they mean, why they are there, and what they portend.

He shakes his head. There is no time for new questions when there are urgent answers waiting for him on deck. With a little luck he should soon be able to put these pirate-superstitions behind him forever. The thought adds speed to his steps away from the metal door. It is forgotten as soon as he escapes the brig.

Passageways twist and turn like a maze. The Impala is old, older than any vessel Castiel has sailed, and her innards are strange and cramped and coiled like intestines — seeming bigger inside than she could possibly. He loses his way more times than he would care to remember as he moves up through the levels towards the deck, towards the navy and to freedom.

The thump of gunner and powder-monkey feet overhead are a clear sign as Castiel approaches the gundeck, the last stop on the way to the surface. Distantly he hears orders relayed; “prepare the guns,” “set ‘em boys,” “on my call!” and a spark of frivolous thought suddenly knocks at the inside of Castiel’s skull.

If he can reach Dean, if he can speak to him before the Impala fires, if Castiel can persuade them to surrender, then perhaps, just perhaps the navy might spare them from the noose. They might live, Dean might live. The idea barely feels like his own, so different to the gospel he had been preaching mere days before, but it puts fire in Castiel’s heart as he darts onto the gundeck. Keeping to the shadows he works his way towards the stern. If he remembers it correctly there is a hatchway up towards the quarterdeck where Dean will be, at the wheel and barking orders like any captain worth his salt.
The first wisps of smoke reach Castiel as he climbs. Somewhere the Impala is burning. It was obvious she was hit from the way she lists in the water, but things could get very bad very quickly if her opponent is using incendiaries so early in the battle. Rufus and his crew must be racing to patch her wounds and damp the flames before the bulkheads are overwhelmed and they are all sent down to the depths.

Eventually he arrives in a passage he recognises, close to the captain’s cabin, the scene of Castiel’s shame forever burnt into his brain. The burgeoning sounds of battle reach his ears, shouts and shots and over it all the glass-sharp cut of orders slicing the air. Dean’s voice is clear, precise, there is no warmth or humour in him now. He is captain of a warship and violence blackens the edge of every word.

Castiel’s heart tightens like a fist in his chest, vaguely aware it’s not fear he is feeling, but there is no time to examine it further. The door to the quarterdeck comes into view and Castiel’s heart pounds at the prospect of escape. He treads quickly over fragments of glass and fractured wood — the small leaded windows that decorate the the front of the captain’s rooms have been blown in by the cannon-fire and now lay scattering on the floor, tiny shards of clear and coloured glass sparkling like jewels in the light.

Breath catching in his throat Castiel slides up against the wall, caution demanding that he only dare a glimpse of the deck before risking the relative safety of his position, unseen and unhindered by the pirates all around. He crouches, dropping to one knee before reaching up to lift the catch holding the door closed. Slowly, painfully slowly, Castiel drags the door open by an inch, then two, the scene on deck expanding before his eyes.

The deck is smudged in smoke, the men at their posts and ready, Dean by the wheel surrounded by his lieutenants. Beyond them he looks to the ship keeping pace alongside the Impala, and Castiel’s heart sinks like a stone towards the bottom of the ocean.

How long does it take for hope to be extinguished? There one moment and gone the next, hope is as insubstantial as a puff of blue pipe-smoke and the wound left in its absence is more lethal than a bullet to the heart.

There is no navy ship, no rescue, just another pirate ship, old and dirty and spilling cannon-fire from her sides as she easily matches the speed of the Impala. Two creaking ships tussling for dominance on the back of an uncaring sea.

There is a lump in his throat that he tries to swallow down.

No: this does not have to be his end.

Castiel stamps down hard on the despair that bubbles up, threatening to overwhelm him. Desperation is all that remain and he hangs onto it for dear life.

Dean can be won over. Castiel can make a show of being open to turning pirate, hold out until they next make landfall, then run as soon as opportunity allows.

Another blast rocks the ship, and Castiel is thrown forward, hissing in pain as his hands scraping over broken glass. The delicate wounds leave thin trails of blood behind when he wipes his hands on his breeches. The cuts are not deep but they are irritating, and will make handling a blade difficult when he goes on deck, and Castiel knows he must. What better way to make Dean believe in his change of allegiance than by defending Dean’s beloved ship?

He needs to pick the best moment, the one that will make the most impact on the captain and the
crew, so he dares another look through the crack in the door. The crew have fallen silent, gunshot and cannon stilled, paused, a held breath before the real war breaks out. Timbers creak, the sea rushes against the hull and sails flap and billow as they catch the wind. Dean’s back is rigid, shoulders strong and set against the roll of the waves. The captain’s stare is fixed on the other ship, narrowed to a point, and now that Castiel has time to look he can see most of the crew starring in the same direction.

He tracks the wet-eyed stares across the deck and over the gunwale, skipping across the churning sea and landing on the other pirate ship. Standing tall on the rail of the Red Queen Castiel sees her: Josie Sands in the flesh, a myth come to life as if she had stepped straight from the pages of a fairytale. There are no words to capture Castiel’s shock, his jaw working and lips moving without a sound.

Miss Sands leans into the wind, a shock of red hair whipping around her shoulders, wreathing like crazed snakes, the colour of her vivid curls is matched only by the wide scarlet sash around her waist and a ribbon tied about her milk-white neck, a red jewel hanging from the centre like a drop of crystalised blood. She balances with unnatural stillness on the guardrail, a single hand delicately placed on the rigging her only support.

She is impossible, and Castiel must consider the very real possibility that he has indeed gone mad.

When she speaks her voice carries over the hiss of scattering sea-spray, hard and cold in the bitter smoke-clogged air.

“We missed you at solstice, Captain,” she says, a lilting merriment clinging to each word. “I marked my dance card for you as well, such a disappointment for a girl.” She shakes her head, tutting like a disappointed school mistress. “You’d have enjoyed it,” she goes on, no sign that she expects any kind of answer from Dean, “women and wine and blood sacrifice. I slit an extra throat just for you, Dean. I know how you enjoy that sort of thing.” The laugh that follows her words flutters around the tension stretching tight in the air.

Dean’s face is hidden from Castiel, but whatever effect her words have makes Josie Sands throw her head back in a gleeful laugh, full and throaty, but somehow without warmth.

“What do you want?” Dean says, breaking his silence.

“What makes you think I want anything.” The mock innocence does not suit her, it grates.

“You’d have blown us out the water already if you were just on the hunt.”

“Glad to hear you think I could best you so easily… Flattery will get you everywhere,” she smirks again, arching an eyebrow coquettishly.

Dean takes a couple of steps closer to the gunwale. “Spit it out, Abaddon, or my men will open fire; close-range or not, it would worth the risk.”

Abaddon? It’s a name Castiel knows from theological works but he cannot fathom why Josie Sands deserves the epithet — then again, presuming the blood thirsty tales to be as real as the woman herself, it might be fairly accurate.

The conversation goes on.

“You might have something I need, and I intend to get it,” Josie says, her voice dropping low and dangerous. The game is over. Time to show her hand. “Surrender your ship to a search and I might think about letting you and your gang of misfits live.”
Dean’s laugh is bitter. “Surrender the Impala, to you? I’d turn the cannon and sink her myself before letting you put a claw on her.”

“Relax, Winchester,” she hisses. “I don’t want your piece of crap ship. I’ve got my eye on a different prize.” She sounds smug, sure the Impala and her crew are nothing and could never stand against her. It’s foolhardy to say the least. If the Impala could take down the Lady Mary there cannot be many who could stand against her in a straight fight.

“Just let a few of my men come onboard and have a look around. Let us take what we want we won’t touch anything or anyone else. Cross my heart...” she says, waving a hand across her chest. She does not finish the sentiment, but it stays suspended like a threat, like a promise.

“No.” Dean shuts her down at once. “We have nothing for you, nothing you want. Now go, right now, or we open fire.”

On the last word Dean directs a nod to someone beyond Castiel’s view; the deep rumble of cannon moving and the clack of the hatches being pulled back are sign enough that Dean is prepared to fight his way.

“Oh, there’s no mistake,” she says, raising her head high and proud. “We had some guests a little while ago, and they seemed very sure that you had been entertaining a guest of your own.”

“What are you talking about?” The sharpness of his words belied by the way his body rocks back, as if he had been struck. It is obvious Dean knows what she wants. “Get ready to fire,” he shouts, and the crew find their feet, moving to their stations, stares dragged away from the pirate queen.

“No.” Dean says, decisively. He turns away, conversation over.

What man has such value that it brings two legend-worthy pirates to the brink of battle. Whoever it is Castiel pities him, this situation is not going to end well.

“Enough!” the pirate queen calls out. Dean stops in his tracks and now Castiel can see his face is pale with fear. “Send the lieutenant over, and I will be merciful.”

Castiel’s brain stumbles to a stop, blanking like a misfired gun.

What..? No… She cannot mean him? That does not make any sense. He takes another look through the gap in the door, takes in the angry clench of Dean’s jaw, the way his fingers curl into fists ready for a fight. She must be talking about one of Dean’s lieutenants. Sam… of course, that explains why Dean is so agitated, why there is no possibility of surrendering him to save the crew.

“He’s not here,” Dean easily lies, “wouldn’t join us, so we let him go.”

Castiel shakes his head, trying to get his brain in working order trying to reconcile the part that wants this to be about Sam with the part that knows it’s not. It cannot be, half of what they are saying does not fit, no matter how Castiel tries to stretch it.

“Send him over!” She demands, her words snarled from between bared teeth, like an animal.

“We let him go,” Dean insists. “We don’t kill our prisoners.”

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Winchester. Don’t try my patience. You won’t like me when
I’m angry.”

“I don’t like you anyway,” Dean snorts. “So what difference does it make?”

Captain Sands looks at Dean for a drawn out moment, head tilted, considering. “You know,” she says, perking up all at once. “I think it might be time for you to meet my guests.” She claps her hands in a girlish fashion as she calls to her men. “Send our guests over to the Impala!”

The pirates of the Red Queen jeer and call, rattling their swords and throwing curses across the narrow strip of sea still keeping the ships apart. An unseen someone hurls a sack into the air with enough force to see it land on the Impala’s quarterdeck. It land with a squelch, instead of the bang Castiel was expecting, right at Dean’s feet. He hurries back when it rolls towards him, but the bag is not filled with gunpowder and nails. It turns over in a lopsided wobble a few more times until final it spills its dripping contents.

Dean grimaces, Sam presses a hand to his mouth, and others close by gasp in shocked dismay. Castiel cannot clearly see the gift Captain Sands has sent them, and is forced to open the door wider to find out what could have such an effect on a crew of hardened pirates. There are streaks of white, brown and red, and at first he thinks it must be some kind of animal, but the pieces come together snapping suddenly into a whole of sagging eye-sockets, a gaping mouth, and hair matted together with blood. Mr Singer conquers his disgust long enough to pull it up by its crown; a dark sludge of congealing blood falling from a roughly severed neck—this was no easy execution—and Castiel finally gets a good look.

“Dear God!” Castiel cries. The lifeless face of midshipman Engleby stares at him from below Mr Singer’s fingers.
A cry of horror moves through the crew faster than a tropical fever as more and more misshapen sacks are hurled over the gunwale. Each lands with a disturbing squelch that has salt-hardened sailors darting out of the way, not inclined to catch the gifts that the Red Queen generously bestows: the heads of Castiel’s crew.

Ten, twenty, a dozen more rain down on the Impala - some without even the sparsest dignity of a dirty sack. Commissioned officers, common sailors, and deckhands, men who had the heart to stand firm in the face of the Winchester’s easy offer of a life of piracy. Good men who should be on their way to rescue and on towards home.

Dean was not lying about letting them go, but Castiel cannot be happy about the confirmation of it, the truth of it spread in gore across the deck, in sagging skin, white bone, and the vacant eyes of men under Castiel’s command—under his care.

His eyes sting, his mouth turning sour from disgust, remorse, and a growing anger in danger of breaking out in any direction. He should have been with them, and given the same choice as the others he would have been. A splinter of guilt lodges itself in his heart. Lieutenant Castiel Novak should have taken his fair share of the pain and the horror doled out to these men, taken it for himself in bargain for the lives of his men. At the very least he should have numbered among them as they died in service to their King.

Anger tears like thorns, ripping at his core until rage spills out and out and out. It is powerful, such righteous fury, and if Castiel were in his right mind he would balk at being so out of control.

He feels his fist clench around the hilt of a blade and does not question how it got there. The air is rank with gunpowder and sweat as he steps forward aiming the point of his sword at the pirate queen. It catches the light, gleaming like a misplaced star among the rotten and blood-soaked men. Curses and insults pile up behind his teeth, jockeying for position, each one eager to be the first spat in Captain Sands direction; threats and promises he will see through to the end, whatever that might be.

He is ready to demand his share of attention from the pirate queen, demand his chance to right this wrong or die trying. Castiel let the words fall free but only gets as far as, “You filthy…” when a shadow blocks his path, a wide hand circling his wrist and forcing his arm down, the point of his keen-edged blade forced away from its target and towards the deck.

“Get back,” the looming shape hisses, and Castiel finally perceives the sweat and seawater stink of the body that blocks him from the pirate queen’s view.

“Let me go, she needs to pay for this.” He growls conviction into the words and tries to knock the man aside. But the large body in front of him is an immovable object, too big, too heavy to be pushed away, feet planted wide and steady as if he had grown from the wooden deck, rooted there like a tree.

It’s Sam Winchester, of course, but Castiel’s agitated mind takes longer than it should to realise he is not going to win the fight, hopelessly outmatched in size and strength. Castiel’s struggles do, however, draw the attention of Captain Winchester.
“Get him out of here, right now!” Dean hisses in alarm, his expression open for a fleeting moment before he ruthlessly shuts it down, jaw twitching and taut.

The captain’s words prompt more bodies to close in around Castiel. Rough calloused hands latch onto him, holding him back, keeping him still until Castiel’s valiant struggles are smothered completely. Castiel’s mind is a tumult of broken bone and severed flesh, his vision shadowed by the need for revenge, as faceless men bundle him back towards the safety of Dean’s rooms.

“Oh-ho,” the pirate queen’s voice sing-songs overhead. “Captain Winchester has been telling lies.” Her men rattle their sabres. “What shall we do about it?” she asks them. Her eyes gleam, red lips peeling back from her teeth in a smile that is more animal than human.

Her crew hammer on the ship’s hull and rattle the rigging, calling out to the heavy beat of a drum. The noise rolls towards the Impala like thunder, the dreadful sound enough to call a sudden end to Castiel’s fight. He sags against his captors, disoriented, letting the raw-nerve anger seep away and his mind clear—as far as that is possible with the remains of his men strewn about like so much rubbish.

He blinks at the concerned faces of the men around him, suddenly conscious that he has no memory of how he came to be on deck or how the blade came to be in his hand.

“Winchester!” Captain Sands bellows over the caterwauling men. “I’m done being polite. Send Lieutenant Novak over, or my men will come and take him.”

Dean stays silent and in the pause some among the Impala crew look at each other with a question in their eyes.

“He ain’t one of us,” someone holding Castiel says. “He don’t want t’be. We could hand ‘im over and have done with it.” Castiel can feel the man’s hands tighten where they grip his bicep, ready to push him away, push him towards the Red Queen and an unknown fate. Sam seems to grow half a foot as he glares down at the sailor, and those same hands fall away. The crewman speaks again, with far less certainty, “Or we could... you know... maybe... fight?”

Across the deck Dean faces his enemy, feet apart, shoulders back, chin lifted high and defiant. The sea-breeze has clouds scudding across the sky overhead and the glint of sunlight breaking through shatters into pieces on the fine-edge of his drawn sword. He is the captain of the Black Impala and the sight makes Castiel shiver in fearful anticipation.

“Do what you have to, Abaddon.” he says. “We’re not going to give you anything.”

“Then I’ll take everything,” she hisses. Her eyes are shadows, black as tar. “Board them!” she screams, high-pitched and loud enough to make her own men flinch away from her. “Bring the navy-man to me, kill the others, and burn that God-damned ship!” She swings her arm forward, sword in hand aimed squarely at Dean on the Impala’s quarterdeck. “I want to see her in ashes.”

The Red Queen attacks; the first line swing hooks over the rail; the next slot gangplanks into place, bridging the narrow gap between ships; a third line appears as if from nowhere, swarming up behind the others like ants from an anthill, a mob that rushes past their shipmates in an uncoordinated frenzy. Many leap towards the Impala in their eagerness to taste blood and battle, clearing the gap as if moved by some un-godly force.

As soon as they gain a footing on the Impala the Red Queen pirates fall upon their foes, their faces twisted and ugly with fury.

The men around Castiel react to the threat without hesitation, disappearing into the thick of pistol-
smoke and the clash of steel-on-steel. He has a moment to gather his wits, to suck in a gun-powder laced breath and appreciate his freedom, then he is scanning the deck for threats and weighing the blade in his grasp.

He is ready to fight; for himself, for his ill-fated men, even for the Winchester pirates, the captors that defend him as if he was one of their own. Castiel moves, zeroing in on a gap toothed brute who just sent Charlie to the deck spitting and cursing with blood flowing freely from her nose.

Then Dean is there, in front of him, blocking his path and pushing at Castiel’s shoulders, forcing him away from the danger.

“I can fight. Let me fight!” Castiel resists. He digs his heels into the boards to stop the forward momentum. “They want me and I must be able to defend myself.” He struggles indignantly against Dean’s hold. “I won’t hide while other people die for me.”

Dean’s look is fierce, cold even, and Castiel does not have time to regret his words before Dean is slamming him back, the rough wood of the door frame digging into his skin. “You have no idea what they are or how to kill them. Trust me, the best place for you is below deck.”

“I know how to kill a man, I’ve killed before.”

“Not men like this you haven’t,” Dean snorts, a grim twist to his mouth. “Are you going willingly or do I have to knock you out… again?”

Fighting swirls around them. Bodies travel in pairs, back and forth over the deck, up and down as if dancing, rhythm kept in check by the regular discharge of firearms.

Castiel intends to argue his case, words ready to spill from his open mouth. But there is movement close by, and his attention snaps towards it like a lure. Behind Dean’s shoulder a pirate lumbers towards them dripping red from his sword, one of Dean’s men dispatched behind him, a spray of blood still arching up from his severed throat. It must have caught the Red Queen’s man full force, painting half his face crimson as he stalks towards them, the next target in his sights.

Castiel looks to Dean and finds himself the sole focus of the captain’s unwarranted attention; he cannot see the danger. The Red Queen’s man raises his arm, aiming a swing at the back of Dean’s neck.

Castiel can only manage half a cry of, “Dean, look out!” before the blade falls.

There is no time. No time for Dean to react. Fear sharp as a razor slashes through Castiel, gives him strength to grapple Dean aside in a split second reaction to block the pirates solid swing with his own blade. Metal meets metal with a hollow clang, the force of it reverberating up Castiel’s arm, pulling at his barely recovered muscles and ripping at his healing wounds.

The pirate is strong, too strong. Castiel has the advantage in both height and weight, but he struggles under the pressure the pirate brings to bear, muscles protesting as Castiel struggles to repel the attack. A sneer of a laugh bursts from the pirate’s ashen lips as Castiel looks at him down the length of his sword.

“Look what we have here,” he snarls, globs of stinking spit flying from his mouth as he speaks. “The Captain’s going to be very pleased with me.”

“You’ll have to kill me to get me on that ship.” Castiel refuses to break eye-contact, to back down in any way. Somewhere to the side the sudden cough of pistol-fire signals Dean being set upon by another group of enemy fighters, slashing and stabbing at them as they try to contain him, the
movement a near incomprehensible flurry at the corner of Castiel’s eye.

The pirate gives a black-toothed grin. “The lady wants you alive.” He steps back, preparing to attack again. “But me, I don’t care if I take you back whole or in pieces.” The last word is followed by a growl and the pirate falls upon him, hacking and slashing wildly to find a way through Castiel’s defences. It’s messy and untrained but sheer force and speed make it effective. Castiel blocks and parries, sending jabs towards his opponent at every revealed vulnerability; the opportunities are few.

There is no cannon-fire, the ships drifting too close for heavy artillery, yet the air feels thick, hot and choking. The sky has darkened, rainclouds replacing the puffs of combed-cotton on the quick breeze, and water seeps from them in a fine greasy mist that stings Castiel’s eyes and makes his boots slip on the deck each time he dodges a blow. It is as if the whole world is set against the Impala winning the fight.

The pirate snarls in frustration dropping his guard, and Castiel takes advantage. He closes the distance quickly, knocking the rusted sabre aside and slicing down his foe’s arm, catching his wrist, forcing him to open his fingers and drop his sword. The man snarls at Castiel and tries to grab him, land a blow with his fist, but the contact is weak, his strength draining fast. Castiel looks down, directing the pirates gaze to the dagger protruding from his chest, Castiel’s left hand wrapped around the hilt.

“Clever,” the pirate huffs. He spares a final glancing at his belt, finding it empty and confirming that the dagger that killed him is his own, before sagging to his knees. Even in defeat the grey-faced man is proud, unafraid that death is already whispering in his ear. Castiel watches with detached fascination as the man starts to laugh around the mouthfuls of thick dark blood that bubble past his lips. “But not clever enough,” he says, locking his gaze with Castiel’s as his eyes slide from fogged-brown to solid black.

The sight freezes Castiel’s soul.

This is no shadow. This is no trick of the light or his mind playing tricks. It is pure horror. The pirate grins at him in rusted-red and plucks the blade from his chest, there is a sucking noise as the point is withdrawn, a congealing dribble of blood splashing down the man’s front. There is nothing in his face but pure malice, and Castiel realises this is no fairy-tale, no joke or superstition. He is in the presence of pure and unashamed evil.

With a cry Castiel moves away and swings again, his blade sinking into the man--the creature’s--neck. It does not attempt to protect itself from the killing blow, or what would in any rational, sensible world, have been a killing blow.

The dark thing laughs and laughs, even as its voice is lost, vocal cords severed, head listing violently to the side. The grey-lipped mouth continues to grin while black eyes stare up at Castiel, unchanging. Castiel hacks at the bloodied neck trying to sever its head completely, to kill it, send it back to whatever hell it sprang from.

He is nearly there, once more slice and it will be done, but he is pulled up by a fell voice. The creature speaks, impossibly, its mouth moves shaping the words though Castiel seems to feel them, like nails scratching along his skin, instead of hearing them.

“Well, it’s been grand, but I think it’s time to go,” the pirate says, before black smoke pours from the wound, from his open eyes, from his nose and his mouth, smoke that seems to have a life of it’s own, swirling around Castiel’s feet for a moment before rising up to face him like the shadow image of a man.
“No!” Dean’s voice cuts through the fog. There is a dull glint of metal as a knife swipes through the black mass. It writhes and buckles and releases a high-pitched whistle as it spirals into the air, up and away faster than any bird or creature Castiel has ever seen.

All Castiel can do when he finally looks at Dean is point one finger in the direction the smoke-monster disappeared and ask meekly, “What just happened..?”

Dean is suddenly in his space again, urging him back towards the cabin, and this time Castiel is inclined to go.

“Demons,” he says as if that explains everything. “The Red Queen is crewed by demons. They can’t be killed like regular men and you need to get out of here and let us handle it.”

Castiel nods dumbly. “Yes, maybe you’re right,” he agrees. Compliance in this case is not for himself, as such, but for the knowledge that Dean will try to protect him, putting both the captain and his men at risk. Out of the way might be the best place until his brain starts functioning again.

As he turns something catches his eye. “Oh my God!” Castiel grabs Dean and forcibly turns him toward a thing he has no words to describe. The body of the half-headless pirate moves, arms and legs flexing and stretching and slowly but surely the dead thing rises to it’s feet, head lolling to the side attached only by a few finger-widths of muscle and sinew. “Why isn’t it dead?”

Dean face goes stony as he watches the body begin shuffling towards them, hands out as if trying to grasp at thin air.

“This is something else,” Dean says as it reaches for him. “This one’s nearly done for, going for the neck was a good idea.” He levels his sword and runs the tip of it through the thing’s eye and into it’s skull. “The fresh ones are much more dangerous. This guy,” he says nudging the body with his foot once it settles on the deck, “He’s been dead for a while already.”

“Fresh ones of what..?” Castiel demands, desperate for answers that hang tantalizingly out of reach.

He gets his answer from the crew as the call goes up. “Zombies, they’re possessing bloody zombies!” Someone that sounds like Mr Singer is shouting.

There is a scream, sharply cut off, only to be repeated from multiple sources across the deck, as more and more clouds of dark smoke twist up and away from the host bodies.

“Damn it,” Dean says. “That’s just so wrong, and so gross.”

Mr Singer rushes to them, a gory slash of red and brown across his shoulder and throat, not his own it seems. “You’re needed, Captain. Them things ain’t going down easy, and some of the demons are still putting up a good fight. You got your knife?”

Dean pulls a long intricately carved blade from a sheath at his belt in answer.

“You get inside, Cas,” Dean orders. “No more questions. This is my ship, you’ll do what I say.” He pushes Castiel through the doorway with a rough shove and does not wait to see it shut before he turns to follow Mr Singer.

This time Castiel is not so reluctant to be out of the fight. His mind reels, trying to grasp at the new reality laid out before him. Through the same cracked window he watched through before--back when the world was a different place, one that made sense--he watches Dean cut his way to the starboard gunwale where the bulk of the fight is still going on.
It reminds him of being on the Lady Mary, stuck sneaking glances from a hiding place as Dean slashes a path through his enemies. His presence seems somehow to grow, glowering and dark like a great shadow wrapped around him, one that leaves destruction in its path. He is deadly and implacable, yet there is something compelling in the motion of his body, the upswing of his arm, the twisting of his back, elegance matched only by brutality.

It works. Captain Winchester’s presence in the melee changes everything. His men (and women) cheer for him as he takes down black-eyed demons and shambling zombies, one after the other, chop, swing, stab, hack, spinning to repeat it all over again, on and on, until the Red Queen’s men finally fall away.

Abaddon rages at her remaining crew. She sees as clearly as the rest of them that she is beaten. Holding on to the Impala is only giving the Winchester pirates more opportunity to board her in return.

“Cut the ropes,” she screams. Anger has turned her face an alarming shade of puce which clashing horribly with her red hair. Her men cringe away looking more afraid of her than the impending invasion from the Impala, but they set to with their axes, cutting the ships free from one another. “Next time, Winchester,” she shouts as Dean decapitates one of the walking corpses, “You won’t get a warning.” She leaves the words drifting on the breeze behind her as the Red Queen sets her sail, and runs.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are loved <3
Chapter 9

The men cheer for their victory as Abaddon bolts for the horizon, cloaked in dark smoke and sitting low in the water, heavy with the weight of their Queen’s anger. Castiel steps freely on to the deck once more as the day brightens, the surge of shared victory makes his heart beat faster as he draws in a deep, relieved breath. There will be time to organise his scattered thoughts, to reconstruct the world with new understanding, and new fears, but for this moment he can breathe and embrace the momentary joy of the crew.

“Do we chase her, Captain?” Mr Singer shouts from his regained post at the wheel, and the crew cheer again. “She’ll be light on sailors. A few good broadside shots and we might sink her.”

Dean does not respond.

He is standing close to the starboard rail with his back to the rest of the ship. Castiel can only imagine he is watching the Red Queen as she flees. Another step closer and worry starts to pull at the back of Castiel’s mind. Something is wrong. He can see Dean’s shoulders move, expanding and contracting in time to his quickened breath, a rattle that grows louder as the crew’s cheers begin to fall away. Castiel would think he was injured, a collapsed lung perhaps, but then the men would be rushing to him, not falling back, edging away with cautious and quiet steps.

“Captain?” Mr Singer says again. When Castiel turns to look there is concern etched into the lines of his face.

Then Sam is there, waving the crew further back with flick of his wrist and a stern expression. He moves to the side, announcing his approach with a clearly spoken, “Dean.” There is more but Sam’s words are too quick and too soft for Castiel to pick up. Sam holds his empty hands out wide, and stoops to make himself smaller, non-threatening, the way someone might approach a nervous animal or a frightened child.

There is something strange in the air around Dean, and Castiel squints, trying to make out exactly what it is. The glowering pressure of Abaddon’s attack has lifted, but a shadow seems to linger around Dean, a shade that goes with him when his head snaps towards Sam. His muscles strain and bulge and his fist tightens around the hilt of his blade. A slow drop of congealing blood flows along its edge and falls from the point as he moves.

It feels like the whole crew, and perhaps even the ship herself, are holding their breath, focussed eagle-eyed on the strange behaviour of the captain. Castiel cannot fathom what is happening, why there is fear in the men’s eyes. He moves to the leading edge of the quarterdeck.

“Are you with me, Dean?” Sam is saying. He places a hand on his brother’s shoulder. Dean does now speak but he goes completely still and there is tension across the breadth of his back. “You’re safe, Dean. We’re all safe now. You can put the knife down.” Sam takes a breath, his eyes flick over the men, across the deck and up towards the quarterdeck. “Let’s go inside, huh?” He says, “We should let the men see to the injured and the dead.”

Dean looks towards Sam, a frown wrinkling his brow. “The dead,” he echoes back, and an echo is exactly what his voice sounds like, a hollow yell into darkness that comes back warped and layered over itself.

Sam is nodding. “That’s right.”
Dean does not move easily, but Sam manages to maneuver him towards the steps and urge him up while he talks in that low, reassuring voice. “You fought well, Dean. We won, Dean. It’s over, Dean,” his name repeated as if Sam is trying to bring him back to himself.

Castiel has seen men paralysed by fear or lose their senses after a devastating battle, but never anything like this before. Dean’s voice, his body, the fine shadow that follows him; it is as if he is looking at a completely different person. Dean climbs the stairs with slow precision. The gloom surrounding him has a physical presence, a weight that hangs from his back. He reaches the quarterdeck, Sam just a few steps behind, murmuring a calm consistency of small words.

Dean lifts his head to reveal eyes of solid black.

If Castiel had not already seen exactly what it means, he would think Dean had been struck blind, eyeballs burned out by illness or accident. But he does know, and his body reacts without thought or reason to the presence of something demonic. He gasps, his heart leaping up to choke as he starts to move away. It is a mistake, and it draws Dean’s attention to Castiel.

Dean is on him in a moment. A snarl rips from his lips and he pushes Sam aside as if he were nothing, before wrapping his fists in Castiel’s coat and half-lifting half-throwing him to the back of the quarterdeck, and he is stuck, crushed between the black-eyed creature and the same damn door he’d so recently been trapped behind.

“Dean, no!” Sam calls out. “He’s not threat, remember…!”

Castiel can hear him close by, but all he can see is the twisted fury in Dean’s face. He is too stunned to tear his gaze away from the empty dark of those eyes, or to put up any kind of defense. He stills under Dean’s hands, under the hard pressure of his body. Dean’s breath comes in rapid gasps that fall warm on his face. Castiel cannot help but mirror it, fear and confusion mixing together to increase his heart-rate, his lungs squeezing out air in shallow huffs.

Unlike the demons, Dean does not stink of decay. There is no stench of sulfur and hellfire to assault Castiel’s senses, and that small fact gives him hope. Perhaps Dean is not afflicted, perhaps he has misunderstood this situation in the same way as so many others.

Pinned against the fractured door, Castiel can do nothing when Dean clamps hard fingers onto Castiel’s jaw, roughly pushing his head to the side, completely careless of the splinters wood and glass that scrape over Castiel’s skull, pulling hair and breaking skin.

“Dean,” Castiel hisses, through the spark of pain. He braces himself, ready to feel the slice of a knife opening his throat. It is the logical conclusion. Whatever spell or sickness Dean is under, he sees Castiel as a threat, the one person out of place on the Impala, the one who does not belong. He breaks away from the void behind Dean’s eyes by closing his own, and waits.

The pain never comes.

Instead, Dean lowers his head to Castiel’s neck and sniffs, drawing in his scent like a cat, letting it flow over his tongue before he sinks his teeth into Castiel’s skin. It is a hard press, but only a fraction of what he was expecting. The worried huffs from the crew and Sam’s alarmed, “Dean, no!” show that Castiel was not the only one expecting a different outcome. He does not think Dean has even broken skin.

The seconds start to spin out with nothing but the points of Dean’s sharp teeth hard against the curve of his neck. Castiel begins to calm. Dean’s breath slows. It whistles softly between Dean’s teeth on each exhale.
The air remains thick with the collected weight of the crew’s anxiety, and when Castiel opens his eyes he finds everyone watching them, poised on the edge of action with worried expressions—Sam most of all. He still speaks to Dean, quiet words to remind him who he is. The crew are afraid and now it is directed not at their enemies but at their own captain. The same one who fought for them and protected them. Despite his own apprehension Castiel feels a need to shield Dean from their horror in their stares.

Without thought he wraps his arms around Dean’s shoulders, not pulling him in, there is no need for that, just holding him, as if it could create a barrier between them and a hundred staring eyes.

Castiel has no idea what to do. He wants to get away, wants to take Dean with him somewhere out of sight and make sure he is still himself, but he also wants to demand an explanation of all the goddamn insanity of the last hours.

The briefest brush of a warm tongue on Castiel’s skin makes his breath hitch. The only other clue there has been a change is in the ease of muscles across Dean’s back; it is not visible but Castiel can feel when something in Dean shifts from taut alertness to…

The slight movement of Dean’s thigh draws his attention down, and… Oh. A solid bulge pushes into Castiel’s hip. It is unexpected and Castiel feels heat begin to prickle his face, his thoughts racing to all kinds of unsafe places.

Dean begins lift his head. Some of the men gasp and renewed fear bursts open at the back of Castiel’s mind, rapidly cooling his budding arousal. He dreads seeing black in Dean’s eyes. But Castiel is no coward and he holds steadfast to his bruised and tattered hope.

And he is rewarded for his faith with the first glimpse of Dean’s dazed and watery and gloriously green eyes. Thank the Lord.

“Cas...” Dean says, voice rough but wonderfully whole. He blinks as if he is having trouble seeing.

Whatever reply Castiel was about to make gets lost as Dean darts forward. A distant chorus of panicked gasps, and Sam’s dismay, are lost to Castiel as Dean finds his mouth and kisses him with a hunger that is overwhelming.

Tension snaps like a twig underfoot, quick and irreversible, the crew’s relief evident in the whistles and catcalls that start sounding out all over the ship.

Sam’s cry of, “Dean, stop,” is pulled up short. “Oh... right... okay then,” he mumbles awkwardly before turning on the crew. “Keep it down. You all have jobs to do. Show the captain some respect.”

He comes closer, forced to physically drag Dean away from his assault on Castiel’s mouth to get his attention. “Me and the crew would appreciate it if you two could move whatever this is,” Sam says, vaguely waving a hand between them, “to your cabin.”

Dean’s eyes don’t leave Castiel, but something in him must understand, because he grunts and starts to manhandle a dazed and pliant Castiel through the door. Before they can make their escape Sam snaps his fingers in front of his brother’s face, drawing his focus, just for a moment. “We will need to talk about what happened.”

Dean is all hands and mouth and searching fingers that tangle and pull at Castiel’s clothes. He is need and motion and scorching kisses, and Castiel is helpless to resist in the face of such consuming want. He should stop this, he knows he should. There is so much confusion and fear still swirling through Castiel from the fight that there is no way he can think clearly. And then there is Dean. What
happened to him out there is a terrible mystery, and Castiel should demand answers.

“Dean, wait,” Castiel manages to say, though it pains him to do it. He puts a hand to Dean face, drawing him up and forcing him to look into his eyes, thanking God once more when he sees green. There is so much more to say but he cannot find the words.

“I need you,” Dean whispers, his voice almost a whine as he leans forward in an attempt to capture Castiel’s lips. He does not allow it. The fragment of sense Castiel has left fights hard to be heard. “Cas, please,” he begs. It’s so full of desperation Castiel’s resistance crumbles.

He shows his assent not in words but in action; in drawing Dean closer with hands on his shoulders, fingernails catching in the cloth of his green coat; in the small shift of his legs that allows Dean space to push between them, until they are hip-to-hip. Such willing acceptance sends Dean’s expression from desperate to triumphant, but hunger still burns behind his eyes, flashing darkly as his gaze drops to Castiel’s mouth.

Dean’s kiss is heated, almost violent in intensity. He holds Castiel’s head still, fingers clamped along both sides of his jaw, tongue sweeping in and out of his mouth, an instant rhythm that echoes the rocking motion of his hips and leaves Castiel dizzy.

In the dwindling light of day the distance from the door to Dean’s bed becomes a blur, as insubstantial as a mirage and disappearing just as fast, as Castiel falls back into colour and softness, a decadence of feather and silks.

The bed swings lightly in it’s cradle, a mirror of the rolling sea that suddenly seems far away. Castiel watches Dean hanging over him, mouth gaping, breath coming fast, tongue leaving a glistening trail as it swipes across his lips. He looks starved, like he could swallow Castiel whole—and Castiel is inclined to let him.

He lets Dean press him into the mattress, holding Castiel down with the weight of his body. Dean’s face is a wreck of blood and shadow, and in the dying light the contours of Dean’s face are made sharp. He looks thin, as if he has been hollowed out. They both wearing the remains of battle, soot and blood scumming up Dean’s sheets, but Castiel sees past it. All he can see is Dean’s; his pain, and his need.

He looks down at Castiel for a moment, eyes raking restlessly over his body, before his hands begin a flurry of movement, pulling and tearing at Castiel’s clothes, seeking skin. If Castiel had not just witnessed real terrors he would be afraid of the ravenous glint in Dean’s eye. He is fevered in his lust, and not gentle in his pursuit of satisfaction. The intensity of it sparks a fire inside Castiel, an urgency that builds and brightens until it is close to blinding.

He reaches for Dean without thought, closing his eyes and letting his other senses take control. There is skin, lots of skin, warm when Dean slides against him. Castiel gasps when he feels pressure against his swollen cock. He will not last long, new as he is to such pleasures, but he can’t care about that when Dean is busy snaking down his body, teeth biting a hot trail that makes his stomach muscles twitch, snatched breaths falling from his lips.

His body moves as Dean’s breath flows over the head of his cock. Castiel’s head tipping back, pressing deep into down pillows, his back sliding on whispering silks. He arches up as Dean swallows him down, fingers gripping and flexing and twisting in the sheets at his sides. He searches desperately for something to fix him to the earth because Dean’s mouth is pure heaven; heat, pressure, movement.

He fumbles towards Dean, tangling his fingers in Dean’s soft hair, barely aware of what he’s doing.
as he rolls his hips up, delving deeper into the soft wetness of Dean’s mouth. Dean is strong and sure, like a rock...no, more like an anchor...something to hold him safe and steady, not dash himself to death on.

“Oh my God,” Castiel pants. “My God, Dean.”

There are other words, other cries in the air, but Castiel has no idea what they are or who speaks them. All he knows is the pressure growing in his belly, a sensation that Dean coaxes from him with tongue and teeth and clever fingers. It demands attention, builds and builds until Castiel’s heart beats so hard he thinks it might break his ribs.

There is a shout as Castiel comes. He thinks it’s his own but he can’t be sure. He rides out the aftershocks gasping into the empty air above him, shuddering at the overstimulated sensation of Dean licking his cock clean before he releases him completely.

Castiel is only allowed a moment to linger in the fugue of his afterglow. Dean clambers back up his body, wiping the back of his hand across glistening lips. Castiel feels the hot weight of Dean’s erection smearing wet on his skin as he moves and he can’t help but look. It stands proud between Dean’s legs, thick and flushed red towards the tip. A nervous tremor skitters through Castiel’s stomach at the sight.

Dean’s gaze is sharper, hungrier, a rough growl-like noise rumbles from the back of his throat as he looms over Castiel. Daylight is draining fast, the last of it filling the room with a warm light that stains Dean’s naked skin in a flush of red. Castiel is pliant from his release, and he puts up no resistance when Dean’s fingers dig into his side to lift and pull until he is flipped on to his stomach.

Dean’s weight on his back is a sudden shock that brings Castiel around. His breath picks up, and this time it is from fear. He does not know if he wants this. He wants Dean. He wants these sinful pleasures that Dean has given him. But to have Dean inside him? He cannot imagine it to be a painless or pleasant thing.

Even in his wrecked state Dean must sense his trepidation. “I won’t hurt you,” he says, words coming out as a low scratch close to Castiel’s ear.

He slides away, kissing the back of Castiel’s neck, teeth grazing over the top of Castiel’s spine. Rough hands stroke down the length of Castiel’s arms making him shiver. The pop of a stopper being pulled from a bottle and a warm splash on the back of his thighs, makes Castiel glance back over his shoulder. He finds Dean straddling his legs, stroking himself with rough enthusiasm and glistening fingers. It is some sort of oil, perhaps.

Castiel starts to spread his legs, biting his lip to quell the fears still prickling deep inside. Dean stops him with greasy fingers that slide smoothly along the firm muscle of Castiel’s legs.

“You’re not ready for that,” Dean mutters, smoothing a hand between the tops of Castiel’s thighs.

The frenzied lust of earlier seems to have slipped away, Dean’s gaze clearer, warmer and less starved, intensity replaced by something more intimate, and almost more terrifying. He sinks down, spreading his body over Castiel’s back. Oily fingers turn Castiel’s head to the side, they carry a light perfume, a hint of flowers and rich spices carried from the east; such a contrast to the sharp stench of battle. Dean kisses him, hard, tongue dipping into his mouth. Once again, Castiel finds it intoxicating. He barely registers what the rest of Dean’s body is doing until he feels the unexpected push of a solid cock between his thighs. Dean slips easily through the oil spread there. Castiel breaks their kiss in surprise. This is good, he thinks. Dean may be a genius.
Dean slips from view, leaning up on his elbows to get a better angle. It’s a strange sensation, less intense than the other ways Dean has touched him, the contact is still sensuous. It grows more erotic when Dean starts making huffing noises as he picks up the pace. Dean’s cock is thick and hot as it slips quickly between his legs, sometimes catching on Castiel’s rim or dragging along the space behind his balls, sending interesting sensations fizzing through his lower body.

The unexpected warmth or renewed arousal flares in his stomach. It is not enough to demand attention, but enough to make Castiel shift against the silks covering the bed, the liquid smooth feeling against his skin is a pleasure in itself.

As Dean’s language deteriorates to a succession of curse words, Castiel understands he is close to completion. He wants Dean close when he falls, so he leans up to rest on his forearms, twisting towards him as far as possible.

“Kiss me,” Castiel demands, growing brave at the sight of Dean’s flushed face and heavy, drugged-looking eyes.

Dean is moving fast, making the bed creak and swing in its cradle, agitated and against the slow roll of the sea far below. He half-falls towards Castiel and kisses him messily, lips smearing a path of saliva over his cheek before attaching to Castiel’s mouth.

The only sound Dean makes is a surprised, “Oh,” then warmth spreads between Castiel’s legs. Dean’s bliss is quieter than Castiel’s graceless shouts, and he stills quickly after a few dwindling thrusts. He sags over Castiel’s back, heavy for a moment before rolling to the side. Dean puts his head on the pillow so that he can see Castiel’s face, and leaves one hand to trail over Castiel’s sweat-soaked back.

“That was…” Dean starts.

Castiel stops him, pressing a finger over warm pink lips. He shakes his head and hopes Dean understands. Castiel does not need words of comfort or romance from Dean. The only thing he needs are explanations. But he is warm and tired and the room grows dark with the falling night; this is not the time, but he trusts there will be one, and soon. He sleepily ignores the tiny part of his mind that tells him he is being a fool, that Dean is still a pirate and may yet prove himself false.

Dean frowns, but does not stop the light movement of his hand as he caresses Castiel’s back. He reaches over to draw a light blanket over their naked bodies. He looks calm now, but exhausted, and there are shadows growing darker under his eyes.

“Sleep, now,” Castiel says. “We’ll talk later.”

Dean nods and follows his command, without question.
The sounds of a ship at sail are no different at night than during the day. But something feels different. Human noise recedes, drawing back towards the rough canvas of the crew’s hammocks as shadows lengthen over the yardarms, just a handful of men remain on deck, keeping watch, making sure the Impala keeps steady on her course—moving slower, more cautious in the darkness—navigating via the stars scattered overhead.

The whispering lull of the sea, and the gentle swing of Dean’s bed with the roll of the ship has Castiel quickly drifting on the soft edge of sleep. Shadows move in a rhythm across the walls, stained blue with moonlight. He knows it is just the rise and fall the prow but they undulate in perfect time to the easy breath of the man beside him. Castiel drifts in and out of consciousness, adrift and blessedly thoughtless as his body takes what it needs to rebuild and revitalise.

Time is meaningless in the slow dark and he has no idea of the hour when he suddenly wakes, blinking sleep from his eyes as he searches for the cause. It is not far away. Dean groans and moves in his sleep, kicking out against Castiel who suppresses a huff and puts distance between them to rub a hand over the tender spot on his shin where Dean’s bony feet made contact.

Dean is dreaming and it is clearly not a happy one. His face twists into a grimace, sweat beading on his brow and running onto his face in wet trails, while his limbs jerk in hard movements. Castiel watches, wondering if it would be right to wake him. Is it better to let it pass and allow Dean the rest he so clearly needs, or wake him to give him relief from immediate torment? Another minute and the decision is made for him.

“No!” Dean shouts himself awake, jolting upright. Panting and wild-eyed he twists, searching every corner for danger and finding only a surprised looking Castiel. “What...?” Dean asks, squinting blearily in Castiel’s direction as his breath slows, shoulders easing, fists uncurling. “I thought... I thought... Never mind.” Even though Castiel cannot see it in the colour-drained starlight, he knows Dean is blushing as he turns away.

“You were dreaming.”

“Yeah, Cas. Thanks for that.” Dean blusters. Castiel can practically hear him rolling his eyes, but Dean doesn’t turn back and it gives him away.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed, Dean. You’ve been through a lot today, we’ve all been through a lot. Half the men on this ship will be having nightmares about those creatures for weeks to come.”

Dean gives a half-hearted chuckle. “But not the women on the ship, huh? No wonder, our ladies are badass.”

“Forget me,” Castiel smiles. “I’m not used to the... unusual ways of the Impala.” If Dean needs distraction, he is happy to provide it for now, though he has no idea why.

Dean turns at last and Castiel and there is a smirk on his lips, one that reaches up to light a spark in his eye, though shadows linger below. “And do you think you might be able to get used to it?”

It’s really a question for another time, but... “Perhaps I can, one day,” he says, with no idea if he means it.

Dean dips forward, catching Castiel’s unsuspecting mouth. It’s a brief kiss, not passionate but affectionate. When Dean pulls away Castiel does his best to pretend he did not taste the salt of tears
on his skin.

“We should wash,” Dean declares, pulling a face as he lifts his arm to take a sniff. He isn’t wrong. They still stink of battle and blood, and there are even more shameful bodily fluids dried to a crust on their skin. The only remedy for the wreck they have made of Dean’s bed linens might be a bonfire. Dean drags himself free of them and stands there in his nakedness, a hand extended towards Castiel and a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Come on lazy-ass.”

The water from the jug on the washstand is cool but not unpleasant, and Dean is gentle as he drags a clean rag across Castiel’s skin. It seems odd, this careful treatment, but Castiel does not complain. Instead, he shivers with pleasure as Dean presses close, and he lets his mouth fall to the clean expanse of Dean’s skin as more is revealed. Dean returns the favour with unabashed enthusiasm.

A spark pressed to a handful of candles gives their skin a warm, golden glow as Castiel marvels at the universe of freckles across Dean’s shoulders. He is almost hypnotised by them as he follows them down with each drag of the cloth, gaze following the path of any drops of water that escape. There are no flaws on Dean’s body. No scars, save the twisted welt of the pirate brand on his forearm. It’s nothing nothing short of amazing for a man who has spent a lifetime surrounded by violence. It’s amazing, miraculous, then again perhaps it’s something else entirely.

Unease stops Castiel at his work, letting the linen drop quietly into the bowl at his side. He is crazy. What is he doing? Castiel’s stomach turns a queasy somersault. He stares at his hands, flexes his fingers experimentally to check they still belong to him. Sure enough they follow his command. They are still wide and tanned and strong; the same hands that saluted his captain, that helped chart courses across the seas. He may have lost his mind; by seduction, confusion, and fear, but he is still the same man. Even if the world as he knew it no longer exists, Lieutenant Novak still does. He will not allow himself to be completely overthrown; to be lost.

Dean’s head is bowed, completely relaxed aside from the tumescence between his thighs. He looks more at peace in this moment, more vulnerable, than Castiel has seen him. He quells the urge to let Dean be. There are questions Castiel needs answered, and who knows what the new day will bring? So much has happened already. He might not get another chance to make demands of his own. Dean is a pirate, and though it does not seem like it right now, Castiel is still his prisoner; whatever it is, this unexpected pull he feels towards Dean, this attraction, those facts remain unchanged.

“What happened to you out there,” Castiel asks. He steps back. His head is clearer when he moves out of Dean’s orbit, the gravitational pull of his naked body easing. “Your eyes, Dean. Your eyes were black.”

Dean’s head rises slowly but he does not turn to look at Castiel. He takes a breath, deep and slow. “I know,” he says, voice cracking around the words.

“Your men were afraid of you.” He does not mean it as an accusation, but the words comes tipped with steel nonetheless, a dagger between Dean’s shoulder blades that makes him slump forward.

Dean sighs all the air from his lungs, folding in upon himself like a puppet with his strings cut. “I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

“Well it’s done, and you can’t take it back.” Castiel watches Dean reach for clean clothes, a loose shirt and plain brown breaches that he pulls on quickly. A bundle of fabric is inelegantly pressed into Castiel’s hands, without Dean looking at him even once, and the silence stretches while Castiel dresses. “I need to know what is going on.”

Dean slumps into a chair. When he looks up his eyes are heavy with worry. “I don’t want you to be
afraid of me,” he says, voice quiet, his typical bravado utterly extinguished. “I wouldn’t hurt you. I really mean that.” He drums blunt fingernails on the arm of the chair. It’s the same one Castiel was tied to when he was first captured and it gives Castiel an odd sense of confidence, of satisfaction. As he was interrogated, made vulnerable, now Dean sits in his place; he may not be worried for his life, but it is clear Dean is waiting for some kind of judgment nonetheless.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Castiel declares. “I should be. God only knows why I’m not.” Dean keeps his head low, rubbing his thumb over the knuckles of his other hand in a nervous drag. “But, Dean, I wouldn’t be here asking for an explain if I was. I’d be somewhere else, somewhere far away from you.” Castiel drags a three-legged stool out from under the table and takes up a position directly opposite the pirate, putting the scratched surface of the table between. Any closer and Castiel knows there would be the temptation to touch, to comfort, and a path likely to take them nowhere but back to Dean’s crumpled bedsheets.

“Okay,” Dean says, with a sharp nod, as if trying to convince himself he can do it. “But if we’re going to do this, I need a drink.”

He grabs a dark green bottle, the glass dulled by smears of dust and dirt. Two pewter cups are lifted, pinched together at the rim they make a noise like a bell when Dean places them on the table. A candle—wax, not tallow—lights one side of Dean’s face. The other lost in shadows that crawl in on them from the edge of the room.

“I’m cursed,” Dean says. It is said without feeling. A fact. A truth.

Castiel looks at Dean steadily, watching as he splashes a large measure of rum into each cup, before lifting and gulping one down. A curse: it wasn’t exactly what Castiel was expecting to hear, but given the succession of impossible things he’s witnessed over the last few days, he can’t even pretend to be completely surprised. He stretches for the second cup of rum before leaning back, watching Dean steadily. “How did it happen?”

Dean seems to have been expecting a different reaction. He looks up and blinks in surprise at Castiel’s calm expression, a small crease wrinkling his forehead as he speaks. “Well, it’s kind of a long story.”

“I’ve got time,” Castiel replies.
Chapter 11

Dean peers down into his drained cup as if the answer to all his problems lies among the dregs. “You're not going to like it,” he says.

“Probably not,” Castiel agrees. “But I do need to know. If I’m to stay…” He lets the suggestion linger for a moment as Deans meets his eye.

“I told you about my Dad already. The big sob story about how we became pirates… Dead mom, murder and all of that.” Dean looks away, towards the shadows.

Castiel reaches across the table, runs his fingers over the knuckles of Dean’s left hand. Making a connection. Drawing him back. “I’m sorry, Dean. I know it’s hard to talk about these things.”

Dean turns his hand just enough that their fingertips brush for a warm moment before Castiel withdraws. “What I didn’t tell you was that it wasn’t just regular every-day people that had it out for John Winchester. He’d found out about the demons, and then the monsters, and once he knew what to look for, he realised they were everywhere…”

“You’re exaggerating, surely” Castiel says. “I’ve never seen anything remotely like those creatures. Not at sea or on land.” He does not want it to be true.

“They don’t usually look like that,” Dean says, looking Castiel dead in the eye. No hesitation, no deception, just honesty. “They usually look a lot like you or me, or anyone you might pass in the street. Demons possess living people and what Dad realised was that it wasn’t random. They were targeting people with power, with money and influence.”

“But why?”

“We don’t know for sure what the ultimate aim is, other than to cause trouble--and demons don’t really need a reason to do that. What we have been able to work out is that they’re looking for something, and whatever it is must be pretty damn important to go to all the trouble of infiltrating the Royal Navy. What happened to my mom and dad isn’t that big a deal in comparison, just a couple of pawns in a much bigger game.” Dean’s resigned shrug is far from convincing.

“Dean…” Castiel starts. Dean cuts him off, flapping a hand dismissively.

“Doesn’t matter now. We spent years chasing the son-of-a-bitch who did it, and I would put money on it being him that made the deal with Samuel.” Dean’s eyes grow dark, haunted by the past. His voice wavers as he pushes on, worry and grief replaced with something darker; violence and revenge. “He burned my mother and hung my father like a criminal, and he was untouchable.”

The laugh that issues from Dean’s lips is a splash of ice-water, cold and sudden and sharp. It twists Dean’s face into different lines. Lips pulling thin over shining teeth, shark-like and cruel. “You should’ve seen the look on that yellow-eyed bastards face when I stuck him with my knife and gutted him like a pig. He sure as hell didn’t see that coming.” A fierce glint of recalled pleasure sparks to life in Dean’s eye, but Castiel refuses to be afraid. Even as his blood runs cold. Even as he holds still against a shiver that threatens to rattle his body.

“Yellow-eyes..?” Castiel asks. “Not black? Not black like…” The words evaporate from his tongue as he looks at Dean.

“Black like mine..?” Dean offers. There’s no anger or shame in his voice, in the lift of his head or the

Castiel stays silent. An almost imperceptible incline of the head is all the signal Dean needs to go on.

“Not all demons have black eyes,” Dean says. “There are different types. Older ones with more power, more strength. Some say they were chosen by Lucifer and given extra powers, but I ain’t so sure about that. If Lucifer’s real then I ain’t ever seen him, and I’ve been closer to hell than most.” Every other word out of Dean’s mouth raises more questions than it answers. They pile up in Castiel’s head just waiting for a chance to spill out.

“And Abaddon? Is she one of these chosen?” Castiel asks. The possible existence of Satan is folded away into some distant corner of his mind. It’s too big a question to touch with a ten-foot pole right now. If he has to deal with theological trauma he’ll take it piecemeal, thank you very much, and he’s already had quite enough for one day; enough for a lifetime.

An inelegant snorting noise comes from Dean’s side of the room. “Oh yeah. She’d be the first to tell you how damn chosen she is, but she blinks black, same as the rest.” His face falls, turning serious again. “But she is old. She’s powerful. A leader—which isn’t easy among demons—and she knows how to plan, how to strategize, and that makes her dangerous.”

A candle-stub set on the table between them flickers and stretches, a thin line of smoke curls from the tip of the yellow flame, spinning delicately towards the time-darkened beams overhead.

“I interrupted your story,” Castiel says, into the temporary quiet. “Please…”

Dean waves it off. “Doesn’t matter. I’m just real happy you’re willing to listen.” A fragile smile twists the corner of Dean’s mouth and his eyelids flicker in an oddly bashful movement as he looks down. The agitated tap-tap-tap of his fingertips on the tabletop betrays him further. “Erm, where was I..?” Dean hesitates.

“A demon with yellow eyes orchestrated your father’s death,” Castiel says, cautiously.

Dean nods, leaning back in his chair. “I kind of went a bit crazy back then. I wanted revenge. Wanted to kill that sonofabitch more than…” He shakes his head. “I couldn’t think about anything except what he’d done to my family. What he’d taken from Sam and me.” In the dim light Dean looks somber. He takes a deep breath before going on. “Demons are almost impossible to kill. Most we exorcise…”

“That’s the smoke?” Castiel interrupts, again. His mind too busy trying to fit the mismatched shapes of the last few days into something resembling sense to keep his mouth shut. “That’s what happens when they’ve been forced out of the host body?”

“You catch on fast.”

“I haven’t had much of a choice.”

“S’pose not,” Dean says, wearing a sad little moue. Castiel keeps still, keeps silent, makes no attempt to soothe the hurt. It’s the truth. There’s no changing it. In the quiet the Impala creaks, a low lament timed to the roll of the sea like an echo of her captains’ pain.

“Exorcising only works on the lesser demons,” Dean continues. “The ones like Abaddon, like Yellow-eyes, they don’t go down so easy.” He looks down, starts picking at his fingernails as if the dirt beneath them is fascinating. “There were rumours of another way to kill demons. A weapon made by demons. And we searched and searched until finally we found it.” A quick movement of
Dean’s hand and an intricately carved blade is set on the table between them.

“I saw you using this.” Castiel says. His hand creeps towards it. The designs etched into the silver sheen are complex, almost beautiful. “This is how you killed the yellow-eyed demon?”

Dean shakes his head as he draws the blade away, out of Castiel’s reach. “I stuck it in his chest, but it didn’t take. Turns out it ain’t that easy to take out a big ol’ papa-demon.” He looks up through his lashes. The flame of the candle is mirrored in his gaze, striking yellow through green, cat-like. There is a dark curve to his mouth when he says. “Wrong damn legend,” he huffs. “Funny huh?”

“Not at all,” Castiel says, all seriousness. “What did you do?”

“Told a hell of a beating,” Dean replies. “The knife did some damage, thank god. I don’t think Sammy and me would’ve lived to tell the tale if it hadn’t slowed him down. Turns out we only had half the story, only half the legend. Sam wanted to quit then. Said there were other battles to fight, ones we could win. But I couldn’t let it go. I just couldn’t.” There’s vulnerability in the look he gives Castiel, a plea for him to understand. “I went on alone, and a lot of blood, sweat, and toil got me closer to the truth. I tracked signs, followed whispers, killed a lot of demons and visited a lot of shady places until, at last, I found it.” Dean’s voice drops low and Castiel leans forward to catch each word. He couldn’t walk away from this story now if he tried. All his attention is caught, focussed like a needlepoint on what comes next. “I found him.”

“Who?”

“Cain. He’s a demon. One of the first demons. A knight of hell who stood at Lucifer’s side and commanded his armies.”

“My head hurts,” is all Castiel can manage to say.

“Sorry, Cas. All I have to give you is the truth.”

“I know. Please, continue,” he says, as he rubs small circles into his temples.

“I found him on an island, one that isn’t on any map.”

“And he gave you a weapon?”

“Not exactly.” Dean hesitates and Castiel’s heart pulses with alarm.

“Then how..?”

“He made me a weapon.”

Castiel feels his eyebrows pull together. “He made you a blade? A sword?”

Dean huffs again. “No. I mean he made me a weapon.” All Castiel can do is look on as Dean pushes his arm across the table, pulling up the loose sleeve of his shirt up to his elbow. The twisted red scar of his pirate brand exposed. “He gave me this. His mark. His curse. Though I thought it was a blessing for a while there, stupid huh?”

“I thought it was a brand,” Castiel says. He stretches out, runs the tips of his fingers over the bubbled scar tissue. The skin is warm, almost hot. How he failed to notice it before is… of concern.

Now Dean smiles. “You thought I’d been hauled up before some island court? Never! Takes more than a few soldiers and a cage to hold a Winchester.”
Castiel returns the smile, glad to lighten the mood a little. “And what does it do?” he asks, curious.

“It makes me strong. Gives me the power to find demons and kill them, even the old ones. Well all of them apart from Cain, and probably Lucifer... but I’m hoping not to run into him anytime soon.”

“Let’s all hope for that,” Castiel says. “So it’s a good thing, this Mark.” He gestures to Dean’s arm. “It helps you?”

“It helps me to kill demons, but it comes at a cost. You’ve seen it. The Mark is a gift from the devil and it wants blood. It always wants blood. It wants to kill, and sometimes it’s difficult to stop. Sam can usually talk me down, but it’s been getting harder. Sam’s worried that one day he won’t be able to call me back. It nearly happened once before. After Yellow-eyes I kinda lost it.” The shrug of Dean’s shoulders is small, defeated. “Cain told me there would be a price to pay, but I didn’t care. I just wanted Yellow-Eyes dead. What came after didn’t seem to matter.”

“I’m sorry that this happened to you, all of it.”

“You don’t need to be. I’ve no one to blame for this but myself. And you helped. You being here helped. It wasn’t blood the Mark wanted from you.”

“I noticed,” Castiel says, feeling his face heat up with the recollection.

“That’s never happened to me before,” Dean confesses. “But you are really hot, so...”

The smile trying its best to pull at Castiel’s mouth dissolves the next moment as an unwanted questions rises to the surface. “Is the Mark responsible for this?” he asks, describing the space between them with his hand. It is an uncomfortable idea but one that makes too much sense to be dismissed. How else had his head been turned so quickly? What else explains how he is drawn to Dean with a force like the irresistible pull of the tide? Or how easily he surrendered himself to sinful acts, and why he yearns for more? Anxiety twists in his chest.

Dean’s look mirrors the concern Castiel is sure he wears on his own face. “I don’t know,” he says quietly.

“It would explain a lot.”

“Maybe,” Dean says. “But it doesn’t feel like it’s the Mark. The Mark is dark magic, blood magic. This thing, you and me, it doesn’t feel like that. It feels good, honest.”

“But we can’t be sure?” Castiel presses for an answer.

Dean sighs, shakes his head. “There’s no way to be completely sure while I carry this thing.”

It is a worry, but Castiel tucks it away for later. There are other matters to be addressed right now. “How do you stop it, get rid of the curse?”

“I can’t,” Dean replies, clearly relieved at the change of topic. “The only way to stop it is to kill Cain. It was part of the deal. He was tired of the world, and he made me promise that I’d go back and kill him once I’d completed my task. But the sonofabitch played me like a damn fiddle. He can’t be killed. Not even with the knife and the Mark. I didn’t know that at the time.”

The sadness that clouds Dean’s face makes Castiel’s chest ache. “Don’t give up,” he says. “There must be a way, and we’ll find it.”

“We? You coming along for the ride then?” Dean slowly gets to his feet and leans forward, resting
his weight on fingertips pressed white against the scuffed wood of the table.

Castiel can give him this. It might prove unwise, but he wants to give Dean a glimmer of hope. “I don’t seem to have anything in my diary right now, so why not.”

“It’ll be dangerous.”

“I know how to fight. You… I mean the crew, can teach me the rest,” Castiel rises, mirroring Dean over the dying light of the candle.

“It’ll be rough going with Abaddon on our tail.” Dean says. There is a glint in his eye and his tongue darts out to moisten his lower lip.

Castiel can’t help but follow the action. “I’m not afraid of her,” he says, words soft.

The candle-stub fizzes and fits, the trembling light makes the room stutter like shapes in a shadow theatre.

“What are you afraid of?” Dean asks.

Castiel’s heart thumps at the inside of his ribs. His eyes fixed on the shine of Dean’s mouth. They sway towards each other, closer, closer. The candle snuffs out.

A sudden bang at the cabin door narrowly averts an imminent collision of lips. Castiel spins away. He curses his weakness, the Mark for its influence, and the visitor for their interruption.

The door opens without further warning or permission.

“Dean, we need to talk…,” Sam cuts himself off. “Oh, you’re still here. Sorry,” Sam says to Castiel’s back. He does not in fact sound sorry at all. “I thought you’d have cleared out to your bunk by now, it’s nearly dawn”

“I have a bunk?” Castiel asks, surprised at the consideration.

“He has a bunk?” Dean says at the same time, with rather less enthusiasm.

Sam turns his back to them as he walks the outline of the room, lighting lanterns as he goes. “Yes, Dean, he has a bunk,” Sam says, his shoulders rising and falling around a sigh that could not sound any more exasperated if it tried. “Ask any of the men to direct you the crew’s quarters, Lieutenant. Charlie bunks there and is happy to help you get set up.” He chokes around the word ‘happy,’ obviously not ready to forgive and forget Castiel’s past deeds just yet.

“Then I’ll take my leave,” Castiel says, pushing away from the table.

“You don’t have to go.” The glare Dean casts towards his brother is so fierce it is a miracle Sam cannot feel it between his shoulder blades. When he finally turns to face them his broad shoulders block the light from the final lamp.

“Dean, we need to talk.” The glance he spares for Castiel is grudging. “No offense Lieutenant, but I don’t know you. My brother doesn’t know you.”

“Come on, Sam, give the guy a break,” Dean says.

“I can promise you I don’t mean any harm,” Castiel adds. Dean may be captain of the ship, but Castiel does not need him to fight his battles.
Dean nods along in support. “Don’t be so protective, Sam. We’re all pirates here, I think we can look after ourselves.” He turns to Castiel. “He had a bad experience with a girl few years ago and now he’s sure everyone’s a turncoat just waiting for the right opportunity to betray us all.”

“Dean!” Sam’s face is a picture of indignation.

“What? I told you I trust him. Anyway,” Dean waves a hand, drawing a line under the argument. “Come over here and say what you came to say, and, Cas, sit your ass back down.” Both men do as commanded, one with more grumbled complaints than the other.

“It’s about him anyway,” Sam says with a nod towards Castiel.

“My name is Castiel,” he replies, starting to bristle at Sam’s determined disapproval. “Or Cas, if you like.”

Sam opens his mouth to speak but Dean jumps in to lop the head off the animosity growing in the room before it can get out of control. “That’s great. Let’s all be friends. Sam..?”

With a final huff of disapproval Sam resolutely transfers his attention to Dean. “Abaddon went to a lot of effort to get him, to get Castiel,” Sam corrects himself before Dean has a chance to complain. “I think we really need to take another look at what h… Castiel knows. Even if he thinks he doesn’t know it. Do you know what I mean?”

“Not even slightly, Sam,” Dean replies.

“Okay,” Sam steels himself, inclining his head towards Castiel in a tepid acknowledgement. “So we know there were demons on the Lady Mary, right? And some of them got away before we could exorcise them. It’s not too much of a stretch to think they might be reporting back to Abaddon, and she wouldn’t bother to come after us like that unless she had pretty good grounds for thinking Castiel knew where the Lady Mary was headed.”

“But I don’t,” Castiel says. “I promise you I don’t, the Captain never shared the final destination with me.”

He expects Sam’s face to fall with the denial. Instead his eyes shine. “Okay, but get this, when a demon possesses you they can tap into your memories, even down to the little details, things you’ve long forgotten. I think someone has told Abaddon that you have seen Samuel’s plan, or a charted course, or a note, a map, something like that. Even if you weren’t paying attention to it at the time, if you saw it for a moment a demon could pull that knowledge out of you.”

Across the table Dean frowns. “And what do you suggest we do exactly? Find a friendly demon to help us out? Because that worked out so well last time.”

“Would that work?” Castiel asks. There is fear curdling his stomach at the idea of being overtaken, his soul swallowed by something evil, but he wants to help. If there are secrets that can help stop the demons, help put an end to their plans for the Navy, he can at least consider it.

“Nope. No. That is not happening.” Dean slaps a hand down on the table. “I’m not putting you at risk like that, Cas.”

“It’s my choice isn’t it?”

“Not while you’re on my ship.” Dean practically growls the words and Castiel is taken aback by the force behind it. Dean’s fist clenches and he breathes deep to regain his calm. “There must be a safer way. A memory potion maybe?”
“I don’t know of any potion that specific, we’d need a lot of power to focus in on...” Sam cuts himself off. His eyes go wide as the cogs turn in his head to land on a new idea. Castiel is not entirely sure he wants to hear it. “Rowena,” he says around a grin. “We’re not too far from Port Garra either, four or five days at most with a decent wind behind us.”

“What’s Rowena,” Castiel asks quietly, leaning towards Dean.

“Rowena’s a who not a what,” Dean says.

“I’ll bet she can do it,” Sam adds.

Dean closes his eyes for a moment before nodding a reluctant acceptance. “I guess she probably could.”

Sam’s chair clatters as he jerks to his feet, excited to have a plan of action. “I’ll go get Bobby. We’ll be underway to Port Garra within the hour, Captain.” A couple of long-legged strides take him to the door. “It’ll work out,” he says before he disappears from sight. “I’m sure of it.”

Castiel looks to Dean. He is far less happy than his brother. “Dean, what’s happening? What’s wrong?”

With a little resignation and a lot of revulsion Dean simply says, “Witches. I fucking hate witches.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

OMG I wrote another chapter! It's been so long (I really don't get much time to fic these days). Thank you to anyone still reading. I love ya!
(unbeta'd)

Cool water is manna from heaven under the heavy press of the sun. Castiel’s eyes close and he gulps it down with unabashed enthusiasm when his turn on the cup comes around. The skin-and-bones boy who carries the bucket and ladle looks amused. Castiel does not care. Fresh water is a treasure when you’re at sea. It’s so good in his parched throat he spends half-a-second considering the merit of kneeling before the barrel to propose marriage. He does not even care to wonder how they keep the water so cool. The answer would likely come with a disturbingly occult twist. Castiel has seen a lot over the last few weeks as he’s heaved-and-ho’d alongside the pirate crew. Doesn’t mean there won’t be something new to tip him over the last jagged-edge into screaming insanity (assuming he is not already there).

“Can’t be more than a day out now,” Charlie grins at him. Her hair twists like curling vines as she hangs upside down from the rigging. The angle makes Castiel go cross-eyed as he looks up at her. “You been to Garra before?” she asks.

“Heard of it,” Castiel says around the last mouthful of the beautiful water that he may be falling in love with.

“It’s a great place for the likes of us,” she says. Castiel had heard as much. The excitement among the crew when Mr Singer announced the new destination was something of a clue. “The mayor doesn’t like England. Or the supernatural interfering with his business and he takes precautions. So, no navy, no monsters, nothing but good bread, beer, beds and bodies. I think we could all do with a break, even if it’s just for a night or two.” Her grin is broad and wolfish. “We’ll take you to the best tavern you’ve ever been to in your life.”

“I look forward to it,” he says, humouring her, “I think.”

She winks before scampering away, red hair flying in all directions. Castiel has yet to decide whether he entirely trusts the amicable state of affairs between them, but at least the days of knocking each other out seem to be behind them.

“Heave-ho, Mr Novak,” Bobby Singer yells. “That capstan ain’t gonna turn itself. We got port to make and wind behind us, so let’s get those sails filled.”

“Aye aye, Mr Singer.” Castiel says, sending one last lingering look at the water-barrel before returning to his post.

Turning capstan isn’t the worst job on the ship, but it is hard labour. Stripped to his shirt, only the threat of salt-rough spray and sunburn that kept Castiel from joining the hardier pirates in their half-nakedness. Showing off dark leathery skin, wrinkled like an old apples. It must have taken agonising weeks and months to toughen up. Stepping back at the next turn he puts his head down, loses himself to the steady rhythm of the work. It’s soothing in a way. The steady pace. The soft shanties
some of them sing as they pace, winding the capstan tight to pull the sails into place.

“How we faring, Mr Singer?” Dean’s voice reaches Castiel over the hubbub of the ship. The flap of the sails, snippets of shouted argument, the relentless smack of hammer on metal rivets; they do nothing to dull the itching knowledge that Dean is near. Castiel fights the urge to turn, to look.

“Middling, Captain,” Mr Singer replies. “But we’ll make landfall tomorrow morning, all being well.”

Castiel senses when Dean moves closer and his work-heated face grows impossibly warmer. This is not good. Castiel needs to keep his distance. He’s been trying to stay away from Dean and his temptations, but even now his body betrays him. The hair on the back of Castiel’s neck stands to attention with a shivery expectation. It cannot be allowed. He dips his head, pushing his muscles harder into the heavy work and waits, hopes Dean will pass him by.

“Slow down there, Novak!” grunts a dark-skinned man across revolving pillar. “It’s not a bloody race.” His manner is gruff but a glance shows a friendly grin--albeit glinting with a bright glut of golden teeth--that takes any heat from the words.

“Ah! Mr Novak, there you are.” Dean. Of course.

Castiel shuts his eyes, sighing with resignation even as his heart fizzes and pops like a chinese firework.

He’s been mostly successful in avoiding Dean since Castiel took up the offer of his own bunk and berth. Dean’s disappointment was not quiet. His entreaties escalating from simple (“I’d like you to stay here”) to the absurd (“the bunks are full of lice and the rats will eat your clothes!”) in a matter of minutes. But that was the problem. Dean was desperate to keep Castiel close, heedless of Sam’s worried and disapproving looks, or the crew’s amusement at their captain’s behaviour. Castiel could not dismiss the feeling it was all a little suspect. That his own dazzled and lustful thoughts, so new and untried, were too overwhelming to be entirely trusted.

What Castiel knew to be true was this; Dean Winchester was to all intents and purposes now his captain; Dean Winchester was an unrepentant debaucher; Dean Winchester was desired by beautiful men and women the world over; Dean Winchester would get bored of Castiel. But even beyond these truths and the dangers posed to Castiel’s fretful heart, the presence of The Mark on Dean’s skin and its role in this strange fever of attraction could not be dismissed. While Castiel holds no more regret than a few dying embers of shame at his lack of control, he knows with a certainty that gives him the strength to resist and to turn away, that they should act no further on their desires if they don’t know for certain they are freely and completely themselves.

Evidently, Dean does not agree.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Dean goes on. “I need to talk to you before we reach port.”

Castiel does not look up. “I need to talk to you before we reach port.”

Castiel does not look up. “I’m needed here, Captain,” he says. It’s a weak excuse. Gold-teeth-man huffs in amusement at his expense. “Can I find you later?” He won’t. He’ll avoid and hide, just like he has for the last few days--in this Castiel admits he’s a coward.

“We need to prepare you for Port Garra. You’ve never been there before have you?”

With his gaze averted, Castiel can only guess that the quick slap of footsteps across the deck is Sam hurrying to his brother’s side. The younger Winchester has proved an unlikely ally in his mission to avoid Dean.

“Captain,” Sam gasps, breath heavy from his ship-long sprint. Castiel dares a look now Dean is

“Mr Singer can take care of himself. I need to speak with Mr Novak right now,” Dean’s voice grows tight as he sees his opportunity escaping. There’s a furrow between his brows and the freckles across his nose have darkened charmingly in the bright sunlight.

“Novak, move yourself,” his leathery-friend calls out in warning. Castiel had not only slowed but released the capstan altogether. Staring at Dean like a love-struck girl. The next man narrowly misses smacking into him as the capstan continues to turn. Castiel stumbles to the side and ends up with Sam’s big paws manhandling him back onto his feet. “Thank you,” he says, running a hand through sweat and sea-water sodden hair.

Sam waves it off, before turning to Dean. “I really do need to speak with you, Captain.”

“Well?”

“You’re needed on the quarterdeck,” Sam repeats. Whatever the issue it’s clearly not something for the ears of the crew.

A tense moment later Dean relents. “Fine,” he says with a roll of his eyes. Then he turns to Castiel, dodging around his brother who tries to step in between them. “Cas, you come too. We still need to discuss Garra before we land.”

Castiel looks between the brothers. Dean looks eager, a small nod of his head meant to encourage. Sam on the other hand scowls cynicism from beneath a heavy brow. “I’d be happy to hear what you both have to say,” Castiel says, pointedly.

Sam’s shoulders drop a few inches and he smirks when he replies. “Good call. We’d be happy to share what we know. Wouldn’t we, Captain?”

Dean stares daggers into the back of Sam’s head as he leads them back to where Mr Singer waits with a look nearly as black as the one Dean carries.

“What’s the trouble, Mr Singer?” Dean asks, immediately defaulting back to command tone as they climb the steps towards the mizzen mast.

“Towards the horizon, southeast off the starboard side.” Mr Singer scratches at the grizzled wire of the beard wrapping the lower parts of his face, frowning as he offers a spyglass from his wrinkled hands. It is a worn and dented thing that looks like it might have seen a hundred battles in its service. Dean scans the pale blur of the horizon until he finds… something. Castiel sees the moment Dean’s forehead crumples in confusion, his top lip pulls up as he squints and leans over the rail as if a few inches will bring clarity.

“There’s something,” Dean agrees. “Have the lookouts called it yet?”

Mr Singer shakes his head. “Young Mr Tran brought it to me. Spotted it from the braces in the foremast. It’s one of them new boys in the crow’s nest right now, so I’m not surprised they ain’t called it.” He gives Castiel a withering look. “Seems the navy don’t always train their young’uns in common sailors work.”

Dean hands the glass off to his brother waiting at his shoulder, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet, agitated. “What d’you think?” Dean asks him.

Sam takes his time, moving slow, the sun reflecting blinding sparks from the golden rim of the
spyglass. “It’s moving fast and against the wind,” Sam says at last. He’s frowning when he moves the glass away. “Could be whales?” he suggests. “Or a big dolphin pod hunting?” He sounds hopeful rather than convinced.

Looking into the grey smear of the distance, Castiel sees only the sun riding the waves as they peak and fall and a few wisps of cloud to the east that promise cooler weather for the evening. Nothing to explain the concern on the faces of the men at his side.

“One minute,” Deans says as he looks over the brisk waves, appraising. A moment later he grabs the nearest rope and hauls himself up into the maze of the rigging overhead. Clinging to the bowlines one-handed he raises his own spyglass to his eye. “It’s big,” he calls, his voice losing some of its power to the brisk wind that snatches it away. “Might be a hunting pod. Something’s breaking the surface, and there’s silver.”

“Like fishes?” Sam calls back.

“Maybe.” Dean does not sound at all sure. “I don’t like it though. Whales, dolphins, whatever it is. Looks like it’ll pass close so get the crew ready, but don’t cause a panic.”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Sam turns on his heels ready to spread the word.

“Mr Singer,” Dean says next. “Trim the sails and get her moving north.” There’s tension in his voice. It’s not a good sign.

“What do you really think it is?” Castiel asks, once Dean is back on deck.

“Nothing good,” he replies. “Take a look for yourself.” He hands off the glass and leads Castiel back to the rail, arm outstretched, finger pointing the direction to look.

It takes a moment for Castiel’s eye to adjust, a moment of disorientation as he focuses through the magnification of the thick lenses. “That is strange,” he says, once he finds the disturbance.

“Understatement,” Dean mutters. “Any ideas, Lieutenant?”

He looks again. Concentrates as the crew shout around and above him, pulling struts and levers until the canvas flaps and billows, capturing the vital wind. Castiel hardly knows what it is he sees. The empty distance can play tricks with size and perspective, but it looks big. Silver-flecked water boils and churns like a feeding frenzy, but it’s travelling fast. Beyond that is a shape. A shallow hump, too constant and defined to be fish thrashing in the water. The shape too low and organic to be a ship. It rolls through the water, dark like a shadow.

Movement close to the ship catches Castiel’s attention as he lowers the glass. Fleeting shapes, arrowing fast, scattering in all directions ahead of the approaching disturbance. The water breaks. A dark fin slices a line between the swells. Then another.

“Sharks!” he calls in surprise, pointing to the darting shapes. Another creature breaks the surface not far behind. “No, wait... dolphins?” They are not usually happy companions.

Dean looks to where Castiel points. “This is bad,” he says. “Can you climb?” He nods towards the mizzen mast. He does not wait for Castiel’s answer. “Go tell me what you see.” Dean turns to the men closest to him. As Castiel climbs above the deck he can still make out Dean’s words. “Gunners at the ready. Get every one that can be spared behind a cannon.” The questioning looks and the odd mumbled “Captain?” are met with a hard look that sends them hurrying to their tasks.

At last the lad in the crow’s nest spys the danger for himself, and cries out a timid warning, “To the
east, Captain! There’s something coming up fast on the starboard side!”

Steadying himself in the rigging Castiel looks again towards the blur where sky meets sea. Just in time to see the beast break through the seething waves. He tries to shout but can’t find the words. Dizzy in disbelief Castiel makes a wrong step, one foot slipping dangerously on the ropes. He only stays upright by pulling the ropes towards him in a desperate embrace.

He can’t look away.

The beast surfaces again. A grey, bulbous mass, and one huge, terrible yellow eye set firm on the Impala. Castiel knows what it is. He’s heard the legends, but he can’t make his mouth name it. He doesn’t have to. The lookout’s call draws the crew’s attention and most look as shocked as Castiel feels.

There’s no shout. No single cry to alert the crew. Its seems that no one wants to be the one to acknowledge what they are seeing. But the word swells on its own. Runs through the ship in whispers and gasps and curses until there can be no doubt.

The Leviathan has come.
Chapter 13

“Set the cannon!” A shout rises above terror-frozen sailors. “We ain’t gonna outrun this thing. Let make damn sure it don't mistake us for an easy meal.” Mr Singer’s voice is firm, a steady mooring.

Caught in the rigging, Castiel hears rather than sees the crew scramble for their posts, stumbling in haste and cursing. He should untangle himself, climb down and contribute to the resistance as best he can. But the sight of the beast is arresting. It has him stuck fast and staring at the approach of monstrous death.

The sea boils before it; a shining rush of all the life the sea has to offer, fish and mammal alike, they instinctively flee. The turbulent water is streaked with the sleek shade of shark and ray, dolphin and barracuda, as well as other shapes, less clear and more disconcerting. The force of their passage under and around, rolls the ship, and Castiel clings to the ropes, helpless, like a bird caught in a net.

The leviathan rises ponderously from the sea. A saw-toothed hole, half resembling a mouth, stretches wide around a twisted roar. It shakes the air, the water, the sailors’ bones. Booming and keening and vibrating at different pitches, it is like nothing Castiel has ever hear before. Some try to cover their ears, but the sound travel through them like a tremor. Tentacle-like arms project from the blubberous mass; whipping, reaching, slicing and snapping, as it drags itself through the water.

They are vulnerable. All the cannon on the Impala are no match for the sheer scale of this unhallowed creature.

“Wait for my command!” Dean calls out. His eye fixed on the threat, one arm raised waiting for the monster to come within range before giving the signal. “All gunners ready?”

Affirmations roll in from across the ship; men and women, young and old, they face this end together. Even the lad in the crows nest has a pistol loaded and drawn. One eye squeezed shut, as if the accuracy of his aim is going to make the difference in this fight. Castiel fumbles a hand towards his hip in search of his own side arm and curses at its absence, remembering too late that his weapons are left useless on his bunk--no need of them for a day at the capstan, after all.

Something slams hard against the keel and the ship lurches, pushed to one side. The Impala groans as she shifts, boards straining at the impact, and the sound is accompanied by scattered shots, scared crewmen firing wildly out of pure terror.

“Wait for it,” Dean shouts, again. Somehow his voice rises above the din to settle fraying nerves--as far as that's possible.

The shape looms, sea water running off its mottled and gelatinous skin as it rises, rises, blots out a chunk of the sky. Its one yellow-eye looks mad and rolls ceaselessly in its socket, a ripped and empty hole on the other side of its head where its twin once sat. The creature looks half melted, and Castiel does not even want to think about could have done that to a such a monster.

“Wait for it.”

The wave the creature has created hits them first. The Impala heaves violently at the impact and Castiel clings tighter, trying not to think about how vulnerable he is, stuck up above the deck. If the lookout can keep himself in check then Castiel can certainly do the same.

“Wait for it.”
One sinuous tentacle whips free from the water on the other side of the ship. It crashes to the deck, just as the crew being to turn, surprised by the unexpected angle of attack. They flee, but not all move fast enough and they disappear without time for so much as a shriek beneath the weight. The leviathan contracts the appendage, squeezing the middle of the ship like a tightening belt, pulling them closer to that great gaping hole of a mouth. The monster roars again. Its stinking breath noxious, the scent of rot and decay, and heavy drops of steaming sputum spreading a miasma over the Impala.

They are going to die.

The Impala screams as her ribs start to splinter from the pressure, bolts and rivets fracture and fall away.

“Wait...” Dean has one arm wrapped around the gunwale now, the other still held high, despite the steep angle of the deck. The impala is almost on its side and Castiel’s stomach lurches in synchrony as they tip further, further...

“Now!” Dean shouts. The cannon blast on order. The shot angled up, tilted as they are, directly into the beast’s open maw. It cries out, perhaps in pain or maybe in anger, and moves its bubbling head away. It does not release them. “Gunners reload!” the Captain demands. And the crew fight through their fears. Wrestling with the cannon, struggling against gravity with the racks and tethers as the deck rises still. Another barrage is unleashed. It hits lower this time and chunks of meat are blown from the monster’s side. The tentacle loosens a little at first. “Anything you’ve got left,” Dean cries, “let him have it!” A few more cannon send their loads, while the rest lift rifles, pistols, even empty buckets and rusted metal spokes are hurled with vehemence towards the enemy. The tentacle releases further, the monster shaking its huge misshapen head at the cloud of bullets, until finally it slips away completely, crashing back into the sea. The creature lets out one last roar and retreats among the rugged waves.

They won. Castiel cannot believe it as he starts to right himself and untangle the rigging. It feels unreal. Apparently neither can the crew as silence falls over them watching the beast sink back to the depths, moving away. Finally a female voice rises, joyful “We kicked its ass! Good job, Captain!” One by one the pirates take up the cry.

Still at the gunwale Dean watches the agitated sea, but there is a sag to his shoulders as he exhales, before turning to nod at the jubilant crowd across the still heaving deck. He makes eye-contact with each person as he goes; a comfort or a count of those still standing? Perhaps both.

“No time for this,” Mr Singer complains. “Get moving, there’s damage to fix and men to bury.” Sobering the gleeful atmosphere at once.

Dean looks up, catches sight of Castiel. “You gonna hang around there all day being useless or do you feel like lending a hand?” He doesn’t look entirely happy, the Impala is in bad shape after all, but there is a reassuring light in his eye as he gives Castiel the help he does not need to extract himself from the ropes. “You okay?” Dean asks, once Castiel is back on his feet and leaning into the roll of the deck.

“Fine, I’m fine.” Castiel tries to reassure, mildly embarrassed at the attention Dean is paying him. Nevertheless, Dean’s hands flap anxiously across Castiel’s shoulders and down his sides, checking him over as if he does not believe a word Castiel says. “Really, I am,” he steps away, straightens up. “There are others who need you now, Captain.” There are wounded sailors. The ship needs attention for the broken hull. Even now, with the ship still caught in the dramatic roll of the sea, some of the crew are busy tying down anything within reach, a temporary measure to reduce the impact of lost rivets, snapped ropes, and broken boards.
Dean blinks for a moment, then nods understanding. “Don’t wander too far,” he says with a wink and a quick tilt of his lips.

He is ridiculous and Castiel can’t stop looking at him. At this astonishing man who spends his life fighting monsters and demons and all the madness of the world, and can still walk away with a smile on his face. An unaccountable feeling bubbles in his chest, something sudden, and warm, and rushing, and Castiel’s breath catches in his throat. They are alive, both of them. Together, now. Amazing. He catches at Dean’s sleeve, and without any idea what he wants to say he opens his mouth to speak...

“Cannon!” An urgent warning from several voices at once, “Look out! Watch out!” A loud crack and tumbling thump, a fast dark blur that Castiel sees over Dean’s shoulder. There’s no time. No plan. No thought. Castiel reacts. Pushes his Captain out of the path of danger, just in time, as a tonne or more of out of control cast-iron hurtles across the incline of the deck. There is a rush of air as he spins out of its path, quick and light footed; if only his dancing was as nimble!

He looks up at Dean who is wide-eyed and pale. “Fuck,” is all he seems to be able to say as ships reaches the peak of its roll and the cannon escapes, smashing backwards through the rail on the other side of the ship. “Fuck!” he says again, more urgently now as he reaches towards Castiel, too late.

He never saw it coming. Distracted by the beat of his heart and the bulky urgency of the cannon as it passed, he never spared a thought for the broken restraints, the cord and iron shackles that should have kept the cannon in place. They follow after as the cannon is lost overboard, coiling across the deck as if they had a purpose. There’s not time to wonder what is happening. There is just the sensation of a loop of twisted bast tightening around his ankle, the pain of splintered wood as his body scrapes over the broken ribs of the impala, and the gasping shock of cold water as it swallows him whole.

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