A Princess By Any Other Name

by Unforth

Summary

Everything about this mission smacks of trouble. It’s not surprising that King John has set up an arranged marriage for Princess Deanna now that she has come of age, but why is he sending her to meet her betrothed with such a minimal escort? And why Castiel, who isn’t exactly known for his loyalty to the crown? And why are they stopping at the mage city of Ilchester on the way? Castiel doesn’t know and he doesn’t care, as long as the answers don’t
get him killed.

Notes

...and we're back.

If you're one of my regular readers, you may have been wondering, "what the heck has unforth been doing for a month? Why hasn't she been posting?"

This is what I've been doing. This is why I haven't been posting. Since November 1st I've written 100,000+ words of this story. Originally, this was going to be my submission to the Supernatural Megabang. For personal reasons, I have decided to drop out of that challenge, though. Which, really, is all of your gains, because I have a *complete first draft* of this story. It's 118,000 words. So, a complete novel, just for ya'll.

Here's the plan. I am NOT going to post this all at once. I've got a mess of other projects to work on, some of which aren't fanfic and thus will potentially result in more periods during which I have no newly written content to post. As such, I will be doing something I've never done before: posting chapters on a regular set schedule.

New chapters of A Princess By Any Other Name will come out every Sunday. When I wrote the first draft I didn't actually break the story into chapters, but I'd guess it'll end up split into roughly 15 to 20 chapters. I might add tags; I put in everything I could remember but I wrote this *very* fast even by my standards so I might have accidentally left some stuff out.

...heed the tags. There's some rough stuff in our boys backstories, but I wouldn't say this is one of my angstier stories. :) Note that, due to the nature of Dean's story, there were some challenges with pronouns from a writing standpoint. The story is from Castiel's PoV, and in general, when Dean is presenting as Dean, male pronouns are used, and when Dean is presenting as Deanna, female pronouns are used.

I hope you enjoy! Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Yule, Happy New Year, and a joyous whatever-else-you-may-celebrate!! <3
“Thank you for joining us, Sir Knight,” said his Royal Majesty, acknowledging Castiel’s presence for the first time. Castiel resisted the urge to grind his teeth. He’d had been standing there for the better part of five minutes, stiff-backed and parade-ground proper, without the least acknowledge from King Winchester even as the Prince and Princess kept glancing at him sympathetically and the stranger with whom the King had been conversing side-eyed him curiously. “This is Ambassador Shurley of Vermilion.”

“Your Excellency,” murmured Castiel with a show of respect, making a leg and inclining his head. Long strands of dark hair fell about his face and he was glad that bending hid a grimace; he wore his helmet so frequently he forgot to get haircuts. “How may I be of service, your Majesty?”

King Winchester rose and swept his fur-lined mantle from his broad shoulders, gem-encrusted gold crown resting heavily on his brow. He circled his ornate throne once before standing boldly before the throne room. His behavior suggested he was speaking to a great host, when, aside from the two ceremonial guards by the door, the five of them were the only people in the room. _Pompous ass_.

Shurley, at least, looked suitably impressed, but young Prince Samuel scowled and glared daggers at his father, and Princess Deanna stared down at her clasped hands with an expression that she’d schooled to neutrality with obvious difficulty.

“It is a grand day for Lawrence,” declaimed King Winchester unnecessarily. “You now learn informally what the rest of the Kingdom will learn by formal decree tonight: our precious Princess Deanna is betrothed to the Prince of Vermilion, his Royal Highness Prince Michael. She’ll be Queen there someday, when Queen Naomi dies,” he added, beaming at his daughter. She wilted under his attention, seeming to shrink into her pink, lacy dress, the burnished silver tiara nestled in her long, blonde-brown hair resembling a shackle more than a crown.

Not for the first time, Castiel felt bad for the young Princess. As far as he’d been able to determine in the decade that he’d served as a knight in the court of Lawrence, the girl had never made a choice for herself, forever pushed and pulled in whatever direction her father willed since her mother died when she was four. She’d come of age mere days ago and she was already engaged. Idly, Castiel wondered if the Princess had ever met Prince Michael. Probably not. He was even older than Castiel, and reputed to be a stick in the mud, a sad contrast to the Princess’ often vivacious spirits. However, compatibility was rarely a factor in royal matches. All that mattered was the alliances that could be forged, the peace that could be made, the control that could be seized, and the theoretically brighter future that could be built for the Kingdoms in question.

A brighter future for the individuals involved was irrelevant.

None of that was Castiel’s business, though. He still hadn’t the foggiest idea what any of this had to do with him.

“Ambassador, this is the finest Knight in the kingdom, Sir Castiel,” King Winchester lied to Shurley with an air of condescension. “I can think of no one better qualified to escort the Princess to her betrothed safely.”

_Really? No one? What about Singer? Henriksen? Mills or Harvelle or Fitzgerald or any of the actually loyal, devoted, honorable Knights in your service?_

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Shurley. He managed to sound quavering and weak despite the acoustics of the room, which amplified even the most modest speech to grandeur. “We are relying on you, Sir
Knight. This alliance will secure the future of both our peoples. I—"

“Save your speech for tonight’s official presentation,” King Winchester interrupted. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, I need to talk to Castiel alone.”

“Of course, your Majesty,” Shurley demurred with a nod far more polite than the King’s behavior warranted. He strode across the room and the guards at the door opened the enormous wooden doors and pulling them shut again behind him with a clatter. No one else moved. The King glowered at his children.

“You, too,” he snapped. Samuel glared at him, Deanna flinched, and both rose slowly, murmuring “yes Sirs” under their breath. They turned to walk out side by side, the doors opening and shutting behind them again. Castiel watched them go; as soon as they were out of the room, Samuel put an arm around his sister’s shoulders and stood up straighter to whisper in her ear. It was a bit of a reach; though Deanna was only 18 and a woman, she stood taller than most men, and Samuel was but a youth and yet to hit his growth spurt.

“How may I serve, your Majesty?” said Castiel, not bothering to make his tone respectful. When Castiel had arrived in the Lawrence, he’d offered his services no questions asked, and those were the terms on which his dubious fealty had been accepted. He didn’t like his master but he couldn’t go home. King John’s biggest fault was a tendency to bombast; a far cry from the multitudinous sins of Castiel’s prior patrons, both of whom wanted him dead. Castiel was safe here. The King had accepted Castiel’s oaths at face value, and fortunately never demanded the kind of ridiculous kowtowing that some rulers seemed to think essential in their subjects.

“You will take Deanna to Vermilion, as I said,” said Winchester gruffly, not bothering to perform now that only Castiel was there to see. “Her wedding day is in six weeks, and I expect her to arrive safely and in good time.”

“That won’t be a problem, Sir. Even if the roads are bad it shouldn’t take longer than four weeks to reach Vermilion.”

There was an uncomfortably long, inexplicable pause.

“You are going by way of Ilchester,” the King said in a rush. Castiel started and blinked despite himself. What the King intended was none of Castiel’s concern, but that they’d go by way of the city of Mages was bizarre and inexplicable. “There is a man there, Inquisitor Alastair, with whom I’ve made an appointment for the Princess. She must be at that appointment, precisely four weeks from today, and she must still be punctual to her formal betrothal ceremony. Should any harm befall her – whether that be hardship or injury or indignity to her pride, prestige, or person – I will blame you personally, and you will face the consequences. Do you understand, Castiel?”

“It’s none of my concern why the Princess must see a high mage before her nuptials.

“Yes, Sir.”

I do wonder…

…but I shouldn’t.

What a pain in the ass this assignment is going to be.

“Thank you, Sir Knight,” Deanna murmured in her usual soft, gentle way. Her voice was low, breathy, and Castiel supposed it was attractive. Women were of little interest to Castiel sexually,
though if he grew bored enough or desperate enough one would do. He preferred the company of
men when he bothered with such things at all. As she’d grown Deanna had come to be as close to
what Castiel liked as he might find in any woman – tall enough to look Castiel in the eye, thin and
lanky with youth, small breasted, her hard jawline made feminine by plush pink lips, gorgeous wide
eyes and long eye lashes. She expertly, subtly enhanced what nature had given her with make-up
and fashion, and the travel dress she wore was modestly high-cut yet clung to her meager curves. It
was a good thing the roads were well-patrolled between the two kingdoms or else Castiel might have
trouble protecting her virtue. As it was, he anticipated they’d spend most nights in inns and every day
proceeding at a relatively leisurely pace. Despite the King’s harsh injunction, it was not a
prohibitively long journey to make in the time provided, and Castiel saw no reason to anticipate
trouble.

“Your Highness,” he replied with a bow. “May I help you into your saddle?” She nodded. A groom
held her mount steady, a fine, sleek beast named Impala, and she set foot to stirrup, took his hand
lightly, and vaulted herself up without the least aid. Settling herself, adjusting her divided skirts, she
met his gaze with a challenge and a smile. Another groom approached with Castiel’s own mount, a
broad-sided, un-heroic horse with hair an unusual, unattractive muddy brown color whom he’d
wrly named Continental, to reflect the many miles they’d journeyed together before settling in
Lawrence. Inactivity had left Continental heavy in the haunches, but he was still a good mount
despite that, stolid, stubborn, and dependable. Effortlessly, Castiel leapt into the saddle, holding his
sword with one hand to make sure it didn’t tangle in his legs. He hadn’t bothered with armor for the
journey; it would only draw attention to them. Instead, he wore a thick leather coat over a linen shirt
and skin-tight breeches tucked into riding boots that Castiel had worn over the length and breadth of
the land over the course of years. Another journey would add new scuff marks, but otherwise Castiel
doubted anything of interest would happen.

“Shall we?” Castiel asked. Deanna’s only answer was to gently place heels to flanks, and Impala
started off at a stately walk, Castiel trailing in her wake. A pack mule followed behind him
obediently, so tame that not even an ostler was required to keep it in line.

There wasn’t a single servant coming with them.

The sum total of the belongings that a Royal Princess was bringing on a move that was, presumably,
permanent, were on the back of a single mule.

Stop wondering. It’s none of your business.

It was the latest addition to the list of things that were unusual about this journey.

Not unusual. Absolutely unprecedented. What is the King playing at?

Why was there only one guard instead of a full escort? Why were the King and Prince not coming in
order to attend the Princess’ wedding? Why, of all the Knights in the Kingdom, had Castiel been
chosen for this mission?

None of it makes sense. I don’t like it.

It wasn’t any of his concern…

…unless this was some kind of trap. What Castiel couldn’t fathom was what that trap might be nor
why the King would be a party to such a thing. For all his flaws as a ruler and as a man, King
Winchester doted on his eldest child, his only daughter. That care took the form of controlling her,
directing her behavior, scolding her if she rebelled even slightly, and forcing her to a level of
obedience that some religious orders didn’t expect from life-sworn adherents, but his care was
undeniable. The controlling nature of the King’s behavior made this entire endeavor even more odd and out of character.

*It’s none of my business up until the point I’m in danger of getting killed. Then it’s absolutely my business.*

The journey through the city was as dramatic as Castiel had anticipated. Word had gotten out that the Princess was departing, and as she was well-liked, and the King was popular amongst those who only knew him by edict and proclamation, a crowd lined the sides of the streets so densely that soldiers had to hold them back to keep the road clear. It made Castiel nervous. More than once in his life, he’d been the victim of unexpected attacks, and in a crowd like this anyone could hide a dagger or a crossbow, anyone could have a spell prepared, anyone could be on the verge of violence. He watched all around warily, and everywhere his cold gaze fell, the people quieted. Deanna didn’t appear to enjoy the throng any more than he did; she sat stiffly in her saddle despite a false smile fixed on her face, one hand on the reins, the other waving at the people.

Castiel was relieved when they finally passed beneath the vast city wall, through the city gate, and out into the countryside beyond. At least Castiel was familiar with the danger posed by the hodge-podge, ramshackle village that huddled hard upon the gate. The village was populated by those engaged in undesirable trades, those who couldn’t afford the prices within the walls, vagrants and wanderers and ascetics and farmers come in to sell their goods, all living in dilapidated hovels, unprotected should someone choose to attack the city. Such places always grew during times of peace, the inhabitants among the first casualties when war came. Only a handful of people there cared enough to watch the Princess leave, one shouting slurs, most of the others children wide-eyed at seeing royalty. To a one they gave Castiel and his obvious air of violence a wide berth. Unlike those in the city, who saw armed men as protectors, everyone here understand that anyone armed, whether they were the authorities or bandits, was a potential danger.

The road that led toward Ilchester was wide and well-worn, centuries of wagon tracks furrowing the packed dirt. The surrounding countryside was thoroughly cultivated. Where the land was arable, wheat and other crops made bright green shoots in the fertile soil, growing sluggishly in the mid-winter sunshine. Tracts of small, thicketed woodland, too rocky or steep for crops, were fenced off, the sound of pigs and other animals rooting around audible from the road. Diligent workers farmed the fields, plowing, sowing, seeding, fertilizing, weeding, which activity they engaged in depending on the crop and the state of the field. These people were the backbone of Lawrence, their safety what truly mattered. Without the work they did, the Kingdom would starve, the coffers would empty, and the Kingdom would wither and die or be absorbed by a neighboring country. Mild winters meant crops could be grown year round, one of several advantages Lawrence had over their neighbors.

The Princess and Castiel would travel for two days before they passed beyond Lawrence’s borders. The long journey would take them through unclaimed land, wild with virgin forest, and through the hinterlands of several other Kingdoms, all peaceful and united at the moment. It was as safe a place as existed in the world, hence why Castiel had chosen to settle there, of all the places he might have gone when he fled from Bootbock. Other places were more exciting, more interesting, but there was also much more chance of death. Castiel had come to value his life more than the rush of adrenaline he got when he risked it.

“Will it be a difficult journey?” Deanna’s low voice, troubled, broke into Castiel’s thoughts.

“Not particularly,” said Castiel, riding up beside her. The mule followed obediently, easily keeping pace with the slow walk they maintained. “Have you ever travelled, Princess?”

“No,” Deanna shook her head. Her tiara and jewelry were packed away for the journey, her hair
falling in loose waves about her shoulders and down her back. “It was considered unladylike when I wasn’t of age, and of course I’d not have been permitted to go alone regardless.” She sighed, then rolled her shoulders back. “Honestly, this – traveling with you and no one else – is more independence than I thought to have in my entire life. I suppose it is my wedding gift: one brief period when I get to breathe freely before the end.”

“You consider your marriage to be ‘the end?’” Castiel asked, surprised for no reason he could put his finger on. Reflecting on it, he’d expected that, based on what he knew of the Princess, she wouldn’t be one to look on marriage as such confinement. She’d never seemed more than passingly troubled by her father’s restraint. Castiel’s observations had led him to believe that she’d be pleased with an advantageous match. Prince Michael was a “catch” despite his age, and an alliance with Vermilion would strengthen Lawrence greatly. He’d thought that would please her.

“I’ve been my father’s property for as long as I can remember,” she replied, gazing into the distance down the road. Castiel hastily revised his assumptions. Watching her profile as he rode alongside her, Castiel marveled at the sharpness of her nose, the brilliance of her eyes, the sadness evident in her expression. “In six weeks, when I wed Prince Michael, I’ll become his property for the rest of my life. Even should he pre-decease me – or perhaps I should say when he pre-deceases me – I’ll be owned by Vermilion. I’ll be their Queen and I’ll never have a chance to explore or see anything of the world or have privacy or t...” She shook her head again. “Ignore me, Sir Knight. I know that you’ve little interest in the oh-so-heartbreaking woes of woman destined for a life of luxury and plenty. It’s ungrateful of me to complain.”

“It’s up to you,” Castiel said, trying not to sound as indifferent as he felt. “If you want to share, I’ll listen.”

“That’s what we pay you for,” she said, the first hint of bitterness in her voice.

“Technically, your father pays me,” agreed Castiel. “And yes, I am paid to accompany you, and paid to listen, and I’m even paid to give a damn, if that’s what you want from me. I’m paid to take care of you, and that’s exactly what I intend to do. Though the King pays me, I’m at your behest now. Anything you need, it’s my duty to provide.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, looking out over the fresh fields as a gentle breeze rippled through the green sprouts and brushed tendrils of hair over her face. “Thank you for your service, Sir Knight.”

It was the last thing she said all day.

Castiel expected the journey would be tedious, endless dull hours listening to the twaddling of a young woman he’d found little cause to respect, covering endless dull miles of nothing, with only the tension of wondering what the King’s secret intentions were to keep him alert. Reality was a far cry from his expectations. The journey was tedious, the miles were dull and endless, and he was tense over the strange circumstances of their trip, but the Princess was not the unpleasant traveling companion he’d anticipated. She was quiet, hardly speaking beyond what was necessary for basic politeness, but there was a dignity to her carriage, a confidence to how she rode. She accepted the realities of being on the road, didn’t complain when they encountered hardships such as rough roads and bad weather, didn’t expect to be pampered and cared for, didn’t whine or bemoan her fate beyond what she’d said the first day. More than anything, she seemed resigned. After the first few days, Castiel even grew sympathetic towards her. It didn’t hurt that she was gorgeous. For the first time in his life, Castiel found himself eying a clothed female figure with feelings of arousal and temptation.
Well, there’s only one thing to be done about it…

“I found these for you,” Castiel said, offering the Princess a handful of plump red berries he’d found on a thorny bush growing alongside the road. They’d taken a short break, ostensibly so that the Princess could stretch her legs, but that was merely the polite excuse for her to answer a call of nature amidst the dense brambles of a ravine. She stopped short in straightening the fit bodice of her gray riding habit to blink at him in surprise. The diffuse light trickling down through the tree cover caught her eyes, shimmering with burnished brown-gold flecks.

“They’re good,” added Castiel, demonstrating by popping one in his own mouth. A burst of sweet juice hit his taste buds.

*She’ll be married in a few weeks, surrounded by guards, locked up as tightly and securely as a prisoner.*

Uncertainly, Deanna took one, eyed it, wrapped plush pink lips around the berry and took a tentative bite. Her expression blossomed with wonder as she chewed and she happily took a second bite, ignoring the juice that leaked free and stained her fingertips and lips dark pink.

*If I’m ever going to seduce her and satisfy my curiosity, it’ll have to be now.*

“She’ll be married in a few weeks, surrounded by guards, locked up as tightly and securely as a prisoner.

“Thank you,” she said, taking another berry. Castiel took a second as well. They ate the bunch in silence, but the Princess kept eying Castiel as if she’d never seen him before, expression curious and gentle.

*What does the woman capable of attracting me look like? This may be my only chance to find out. I’d be a fool not to at least try.*

“It’s my pleasure, Princess.” Castiel gave her the faintest of smiles and she colored, her cheeks matching the shade of the juice making a trail down her chin. Her tongue flicked out to gather the escaping liquid and Castiel’s heart skipped a beat, his cock twitching with interest, as he imagined sucking that tongue into his mouth and feeling her sigh out in happiness.

*Call that one a success. What next?*

“I asked the servants to draw a hot bath for you,” Castiel asked. It was full dark and they’d stopped in a Free Town the name of which Castiel didn’t know. The inn was the most nicely appointed they’d yet stayed at; not lavish, but accustomed to wealthy patrons. The Princess had a large room to herself with a smooth, soft bed. Castiel’s room was the accompanying servant’s quarters, small and modest but not uncomfortable, connected to hers by a door. “It may be several days before we stay someplace this nice again, and I thought you might like a chance to wash off the dust of the road.”

“That’s…that’s very thoughtful of you, Sir Knight.” She smiled. “Thank you.”

*Two.*

Over the following days, Castiel found many ways to, with simple gestures, endear himself to Deanna. Surely, his words echoed in her ears – *I’m paid to give a damn* – yet he could see in her intelligent, assessing looks that she was wondering what benefit he derived by behaving so solicitously toward her. After all, he’d not bothered to try to endear himself to her the first few days, so why had he started? The longer they traveled, the more appreciation tinged the looks she gave him when she thought he didn’t notice. Castiel knew he was good looking, even if he was nearly old enough to be her father. The leathers he wore rested lightly on his powerful, broad shoulders, lay
flush over his flat chest and belly. Curling strands of dark hair escaped from under his helmet, framed his eyes, and his cheeks were permanently speckled with short, rough black hairs that never seemed to grow into a full beard. The men he’d been with had universally agreed that Castiel’s eyes were his best feature; judging by the way Deanna hesitated to meet them, seemed paralyzed whenever she did, Castiel suspected she felt similarly. Some of the things he did seemed to make no impression on her, but by the end of a week, he’d tallied a dozen instances where he was sure he’d moved her, sure he’d aroused her interest.

“This is lovely country,” the Princess said tentatively, looking out over sweeping, rocky hills, stark and bright beneath a sky striated by dark clouds. “Can you tell me anything about the area?”

“Giants,” Castiel replied. She turned to look at him curiously. “See those steeper hills in the distance?” He pointed to the shadows silhouetted against the sky, and she nodded. “They’re riddled with caves, and giants live in the caves. They’re not actually that big – the tallest are about ten feet – but they’re more heavily muscled than humans, and smarter than most people give them credit for. Usually, they stick to themselves, but when times get tough they’ll come down from the heights and, if there’s a farm around, they’ll raid the livestock. They try to avoid the humans but when fights do happen, the people usually end up dead. That, plus the harsh terrain, are why there aren’t many farms around. Have to be pretty brave to face these threats alone, especially when the surrounding Kingdoms are so much friendlier.”

“Then why does anyone live here?” She sounded like she genuinely couldn’t imagine a reason anyone might put up with such hazards.

_Poor Princess. So sheltered._

“All kinds of reasons,” Castiel shrugged. “Probably as many reasons as there are people. Some people are able to stay in the place where they are from, to live there happily, build a life, and pass what they’ve built on to the next generation. However, many others have to leave home, for any number of reasons. Yourself, for example – an arranged marriage, and suddenly you’re transplanted to a whole new Kingdom. Imagine all the things that might happen in the course of someone’s life, and you can start to guess what might bring a person or a family to live in a place like this.”

“Their original homes might have been destroyed,” the Princess said pensively. “They might have been refugees, or they might have been in danger from some threat. They might have had families who couldn’t support them, or they might have committed a crime and needed a place to flee. Maybe they like the isolation, or they get along with the giants and don’t feel threatened by them.”

_If you were a son, you’d know all this. Your brother Sam has studied every tract of land between Lawrence and the Far Seas, is expected to know every city, every country, every ruler, every import and export._


_You’re only expected to sit and look pretty, and it’s a crime. Of course you’re beautiful, but you’re worth so much more than that. You’re clever and perceptive and intelligent. Such a waste. Perhaps Prince Michael will recognize your value as King John did not._

“Thank you, Sir Knight,” she smiled. “What about you? Why did you leave your home?” Castiel started and looked at her intently, but if she meant anything deep by the question, he could see no sign of it. She looked and sounded innocent and curious, nothing more. Nonetheless, he hesitated before answering. “I wanted to ask you when you first arrived in Lawrence, but I was only a child and father said I wasn’t to speak to the Knights, that it was inappropriate, even though he let Sammy
do so as much as he wanted. Even my friendship with Jo was begrudged, since she was in training.”

“I’m from Bootbock,” Castiel said, tensing in anticipation of her reaction to the name of the notorious city. There wasn’t a trace of recognition on Deanna’s face, and Castiel’s nervousness eased. “It’s across the Far Sea, and it’s not a nice place. There’s nowhere comparable close to Lawrence, fortunately. I served there as a fighter.” I was a mercenary, available to the highest bidder.

“From childhood, I was in the employ of a man who proved to be less than ethical.” I served him my whole life, through thick and thin, even after what he did to Gabriel, until I finally realized how little I meant to him. I was Crowley’s tool and nothing more. “Troubled, I sought a different position, hoped to find someone better who would help me stop my former patron.” In order to escape Crowley, I made a bid for power, allied myself with Roman – made a deal with one devil in order to defeat another. “It...didn’t work out. Both read betrayal in my behavior and decided to try to kill me.” If I’d realized how similar they truly were...no, I’d probably have done exactly the same thing.

“Fleeing was the only way to protect myself. I sought a place of safety and found my way to Lawrence, where your father proved a better liege than those others ever had.”

“Do you think about going back?” asked the Princess. “Are they still searching for you?”

“I don’t want to go back,” said Castiel, shaking his head. “I value my life more than that. And I hope they’re not still searching, because if they find me, they’ll kill me.”

They’re probably still searching for me.

“That would be too bad,” she said vaguely. Castiel glanced to see her expression, but it was blank and unreadable. The sun came out from behind a cloud, illuminated her face to a lovely rich gold, rendered the wisps of hair about her head into a glowing halo, and highlighted the pale freckles scattered over her cheeks.

Absolutely beautiful.

“I’m sorry these accommodations aren’t what you are accustomed to,” said Castiel with what sincerity he could muster. They were eight days out of Lawrence and truly in the wilds now. The village was small and dirty, the streets cluttered with scraggly, scrawny chickens pecking at the dust. There was no inn, but there was a widow named Ava who kept a guest room to let. They were fortunate that no one else was occupying the room. If they’d pressed on another few hours, they could have made a larger town, but the clouds that had skittered so beautifully over the sky all day had finally coalesced, gathered, thickened, and then opened up, soaking them both to the skin. It wasn’t comfortable travel conditions and they weren’t in a hurry, so Castiel figured he could do them both the favor of stopping for the night.

“Where will you sleep?” asked the Princess, concern in her voice, eying the one narrow bed.

“On the floor,” said Castiel, gesturing at the rough hard wood beams. She gave him an incredulous look. “Don’t worry, I’ve slept on far worse. I’ll be fine. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go downstairs and see if the Goodwife will sell us some food. Will ten minutes be enough time for you to change your clothing?”

“Yes, thank you,” she smiled. “I smell stew. I’m sure she’ll be willing to part with some.”

Nodding agreement, Castiel went down. The negotiation proved simple, as their host had anticipated their need and already had two large steaming bowls poured for them, with chunks of fresh bread to soak up the aromatic broth. Castiel revised his opinion of the accommodations. He’d had less food at more expense at many a finer inn, with the bonus that this smelled good enough to eat. He made the
payment, let her know that they’d be interested in breakfast as well – his mouth watered as she promised fresh eggs, milk, and as much bread as they wanted – and then made small talk to pass the rest of the time. Small town gossip dominated the Ava’s conversation, but she managed to make it interesting nonetheless.

News from the greater world had reached her, the road heavily trafficked enough that she was well informed. Everyone was excited about the alliance between Vermilion and Lawrence, and a friend of Ava’s in a nearby town swore up and down that she’d had seen the Princess’ entourage when they passed through: a hundred guards in gleaming armor, the Princess dressed in exquisite silks, her hair strung with pearls and gems, horses so fine that even the dirt street rang with the fall of their metal-shod hooves. It made an amusing counterpoint to reality, and reassured Castiel that even if someone was after him and the Princess, absurdities such as the woman’s tall tale preceded them everywhere. No one would think such an important person would be so scantily guarded, nor traveling so modestly, nor staying in such a place. Maybe that had been the King’s plan all along.

Maybe.

When Castiel returned upstairs with their food, the Princess sat cross legged on her bed dressed in a thick dressing gown, using a brush to work the tangles out of her hair. She perked up as he entered, smiled, and hopped up eagerly to take the bowl from him. To his surprise, there were several blankets spread on the floor and a pillow that appeared to have been improvised out of the skirts of a dress bundled with other clothing items. The Princess noticed him looking as she took a seat on the edge of the bed, tearing off a chunk of bread and soaking it in broth.

“It’ll be more comfortable for you than sleeping on the bare floor,” she said sheepishly, taking a bite.

“Yes, it will be,” said Castiel. “Thank you.”

There was no furniture in the room other than the bed and a small wash stand, so Castiel took a seat on his improvised bed, careful not to slosh any of the stew onto the wood or onto the blankets the Princess had laid out for him. After a moment’s hesitation, Deanna slid off the bed to sit with him, and together they enjoyed their hearty meal in silence.

“Shouldn’t you change out of your wet things?” she asked when she was done, using her last piece of bread to mop up every last streak of broth.

“I’m fine,” Castiel said. “I’m mostly dry already – I planted myself in front of our hostess’ fire while I was waiting for you.”

“It’s no bother,” she said, staring intently at the empty bowl, her cheeks pinking. “I’ll take our bowls downstairs, and be back in a few minutes, okay?”

“I appreciate that,” Castiel gave her an intentionally warm smile and her flush deepened. What are you thinking, pretty Princess? Imagining my cock? Wondering what a man’s touch feels like? I could make you feel so good. He met her eyes until she averted her gaze, looking coyly through her lashes to take his bowl, rise, and bolt for the door.

Castiel took his damn sweet time changing his clothes, intentionally keeping his back to the door. He undid the buckles on his armor, stripped, laid out a pair of loose pants and a plain shirt to wear to sleep, keeping his ears peeled for the distinct sound of the Princess making her way back up the stairs. His cock thickened with interest, his instincts picking up on his anticipation without catching the part where he understood, intellectually, that they weren’t at the “actually having sex” part of the seduction yet. I wonder if she’d ever let me fill her tight little hole. Then it’d be just like with a boy, except no cock. He’d miss that, he realized, miss stroking a hard shaft as some youth shivered and
moaned around him, miss the way a man spurted when he came, miss coating his fingers with white release and making his lover suck them clean as he continued to thrust into a willing, pliant body.

But for a chance to fuck the virgin Princess...? Heck, I could point out that if I use her ass her betrothed need never no...it feels good for women, too, if not as good as for men...

The door opened and the Princess gasped faintly, pulling Castiel from his contemplation. He was hard and aching. He waited for her to panic, waited for her to flee, waited for her to react in any way, but she said nothing and he couldn’t help but smile. Her breaths came in tiny pants that she clearly tried to repress. She was watching him, she was hoping he hadn’t heard her, she was acting as if he didn’t know she was there. Pretending obliviousness, Castiel twisted to get his shirt, giving her a view of his erection without turning enough for their gazes to meet. He pulled the garment over his head, turned while his face was covered, and she squeaked. The coarse linen slid down his flat stomach, barely caught on his hard cock, applied a whisper of tantalizing pressure, and he opened her eyes and stared at her.

“Princess!” he said in mock surprise and false embarrassment. He made a show of leaping for his pants. “I’m so sorry, your Highness, I didn’t realize you’d returned.”

“Sir Knight,” she breathed. “It wasn’t my intention to intrude...I should have given you more time...I’m so...I mean...I’ll be right outside, knock when you’re ready...I...sorry...” While she spoke, Castiel got his pants part way on, hopping in his haste. He tugged them up and tied the cord that held them in place. The fabric made a noticeable tent, and she stared at it with her mouth ajar around panting breaths. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I—”

“Relax, Princess,” he said soothingly, putting out a hand as if to calm a frightened animal. The space was small enough that one of his fingers brushed her arm, and she jumped and squeaked again. “It’s alright. It’s just my body. You’ve seen a naked man before, right?” She went bright red but she nodded. “It was not my intention for my appearance to distress you, and I apologize that you saw me...as I am.” He made a gesture towards his aching erection – bend her over the bed, spread those long, thin legs, bury myself inside her – and watched her reaction carefully, wondering if she recognized what it meant. He failed to interpret what he saw, though; she was embarrassed, but beyond that he had no idea if she understood any of what she’d seen other than that it was more than she should have.

Even though she’s a Princess, how naïve can she possibly be? Would her family have sent her off to an arranged marriage without giving her the least idea of what to expect? Given that she has a sibling, has she perhaps seen him naked? Has she bothered to preserve her chastity?

No rumors suggested that she was anything but virtuous, but a determined woman could hide a multitude of sins beneath a veneer of virginity and nobility. Somehow, though, he didn’t think that was her situation.

“Don’t let it distress you more, your Highness,” he said reassuringly, using pure self-control to get a handle on his arousal. Disappointment thrummed through him, but silent promises that it was going to work out in the long run kept him from feeling too bad. “Why don’t you get some rest? We’re going to get an early start in the morning, alright?”

“Of course. Good night, Sir Knight.”

“Sleep well, your highness.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

...I have a really busy day tomorrow and I'm worried I'll forget to post this, so screw it, I'm posting it now. It's the 1st of January somewhere, right?

Reminder to heed the tags on this story, cause there is past sexual abuse of a minor and John Winchester's A+ Parenting.

As an additional warning, theirs also a small amount of trans erasure in this chapter (I know better but the character does not...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Murmured appreciation fired Castiel’s blood, left him so hard and aroused he hurt even though he was already buried deep inside a gorgeous, slim ass. The youth was bent over before him, chest pressed against the bed, back beautifully curved, knees hitched up to press himself up into each of Castiel’s thrusts. The sounds the young man leaked were practically feminine, his hair long, but he was a man, if barely of age. Gripping the boy’s hips hard, Castiel thrust and froze, kept still until the boy’s faint moans grew into inarticulate pleas as he struggled against Castiel’s grip.

“Yeah,” breathed Castiel, “you like that, don’t you? You want more?”

“Please – please, help me,” the boy moaned. “Oh please! I need you. I need help.”

“I know you do, beautiful,” Castiel huffed out, petting down the smooth slope of the boy’s spine. “I am going to take such good care of you.”

“Please, oh please, oh please.” The last word shattered as Castiel drew out fast and thrust in hard. The boy sobbed against the bedding, fists gripping the fabric desperately. “I need—”

“I know what you need,” said Castiel, continuing his relentless pace. “And I’m going to give it to you over—” Thrust. “—and over—” Thrust. “—and over again.” Thrust. Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.

“Touch me,” sobbed the boy. The delicious image before him jolted, blurred, came back into focus, and Castiel blinked dizzily.

“I am—”

“Sir Knight, I need your help.” The bed faded away, the walls disappeared, the sense of wonderful pressure around his cock faded. “I’m sorry to wake you, truly I am, but please, Sir Knight! I can’t do this without you.”

“Huh?” he mumbled groggily. The room was pitch dark, the Princess’ voice ragged and distressed. Her only answer was a miserable whimper, and it finally registered that the arousal he’d heard in a low voice wasn’t reserved for his dreams. The desire in the girl’s surprisingly gruff tone was unmistakable. “What’s the matter, your Highness?”

“I need to drain myself, but I can’t,” she pled.
“Huh?” he repeated, more aware but no closer to understanding what she was talking about. He scrubbed a hand over his eyes but the dark proved no less impenetrable.

“Papa told me I’d have to take care of myself after leaving home, until I’m married and my husband can take care of me, and I’ve tried, but it’s so hard. The tool he gave me doesn’t work. I don’t know what to do, and I need...I need...” She broke off with a throaty moan, far too deep, and in that Castiel could hear clearly why his dream had produced the image of a man as the source of those delicious sounds.

“Shh,” murmured Castiel reassuringly. He had no idea what in the hells was going on, but he recognized opportunity when he heard it. “Of course I’ll help you, your Highness. Do you mind if I light a candle?”

“No...no, that’d be fine, anything, but please...quickly...”

Scrambling out of his blankets, unable to resist the enticing sounds that the Princess made, Castiel found the candle affixed to the bed headboard and used a cantrip to light it with a flick of two of his fingers.

*By the five hells and three heavens, I must still be dreaming.*

Princess Deanna lay splayed atop the blankets, thick dressing gown gathered around her waist. Beneath it, she was naked. Unclothed, there was no mistaking her body for that of a woman. Her hips were too narrow, her – her? – cock lay between her legs enclosed in a strange metal cage unlike anything Castiel had seen before, and the smooth skin between her spread thighs was unbroken save for the wrinkled pucker of her hole, meagerly spread around a wooden toy of a type Castiel had seen a handful of times before, meant to stimulate the sensitive place that all men, and *only* men, had within their channel.

*There is absolutely no way this is real. Maybe the proprietress drugged the stew. I’ve had hallucinations of things like this…*

“Please stop staring,” she whispered. Castiel’s eyes finally scanned to her face: flushed, tears streaking from the corner of her eyes, every breath desperate through her lips.

*No. He whispered. His face. His closed eyes. His lips. Princess Deanna...Prince Dean? What is going on here? King John must know. He can’t possibly be unaware that his eldest daughter is actually his eldest son. This must be why it’s just the two of us. The more people who traveled with her, the more likely this secret would come out. Wow.*

“Please...” she repeated insistently. “I can’t...I can’t drain myself, not like this. I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t...”

“I understand,” lied Castiel, rationality finally catching up with his observations. “I told you, I’m here to help you, in *whatever* capacity you require. How may I help you, Princess?”

*Her cock is limp in that cage. It *must* be some sort of chastity device, because she’s clearly aroused – heavily aroused...every needy whimper, every desperate breath...she’s got a toy sunk inches into her channel, how could she *not* be aroused?*

Castiel quelled a moan, his aching cock tenting his pants.

“Haven’t you ever...a man your age...you’ve never helped *any* woman drain her vagina?” Deanna
asked, more tears leaking free in her desperation.

*What. The. Hell.*

“Of course I have,” he said. “But I don’t want to do anything to distress you, don’t want to do anything to cause you discomfort, and I don’t want to risk your virtue. As such, why don’t you tell me what you usually do?”

“Right...right, I should have thought of that. I should have...” She pulled the fake cock from herself, whimpering in thwarted pleasure as it came free, glistening with moisture from whatever lubricant she’d used. “When Papa helps me, he usually uses two fingers,” she explained, demonstrating by brushing one finger over her loosened pucker.

A twisting in Castiel’s stomach threatened even his intense arousal. He’d encountered a lot of sick things in his life, abuses of the most disgusting kinds among the wealthy of Bootbock, indignities visited on slaves who couldn’t protect themselves, things that right-thinking people couldn’t conceive of, they were so horribly outside what was considered proper and normal. Castiel had even participated in such things a few times, though he’d found little pleasure in them. Yet, somehow, the sin lurking under the oh-so-virtuous surface of the royal family of Lawrence shocked him. There was something masterful to it, a transformation so complete that Castiel had been completely taken in, everyone had been completely taken in, even the Princess herself had no idea that she had no vagina, that she was no woman.

“I can do it that way,” Castiel managed. He knelt beside the bed and brushed a finger over her. The skin was smooth, slick to the touch, and deliciously hot. She moaned in response, spread her legs wider, hitched her hips into his touch. Every fantasy Castiel had nurtured over the previous week took more solid form.

*She has no idea, but she wants my help. And I will give her help. I will give her all the help she could ever need.*

“How often did that sick bastard do this to her? How long must he have trained Deanna for her to accept him so willingly, to not even question it? Was he getting off on it?

She is absolutely delicious, and this is fucking amazing, but damn is her father disgusting.

No, he reprimanded himself as he continued his feel within her for the right spot. Deanna’s body tensed and tightened around him and she strangled a moan that no woman’s voice could ever have produced. “Right there,” she gasped. “That’s...oh, thank you...just, just, do you know...do I...?”

“I know exactly what to do,” he reassured her, placing a hand on her side in what he hoped was a
comforting manner. Thrusting gently in and out, he used his fingertips to massage the nexus of pleasure in her body, and grateful noises leaked out of her at every touch.

“Thank you,” she breathed, hips working into every thrust. “That feels…it’s different, but it’s good, that feels so good…”

“I’ve got you,” he said. The Princess grabbed his hand, clasped it tightly, dug her nails into his skin. He stroked and stroked, his body thrumming with desire that he had no intention of satisfying yet, not until he had taken care of her, not until she grew more comfortable accepting his touch, and he relished every small sign that she was coming apart. Her body writhed against the sheets, her lungs choked on every sound she didn’t dare allow escape, and she grew more and more tense. No matter how hot she became, though, her caged cock didn’t stir, didn’t harden. It stayed soft and pale within the metal bars that encased it, trapped by the tight ring around the base of her cock. Her captured balls, undersized, more juvenile than her age would suggest, jiggled within their confinement.

_How long has she been bound? Has she ever had an erection?_ A small, ornate lock caught his eye.

_Has it ever been unlocked? Where is the key?_

“Oh!” she burst out, leg scrambling and kicking against the bedding. He massaged her harder and she groaned. “Oh, Sir Knight—”

“Castiel,” he snapped.

“Castiel,” she breathed, and he couldn’t repress a groan to hear his name said so passionately in that fucked-out voice as the beautiful Princess shattered. “Castiel!” She pressed hard into his hand and with a shudder and a cry she released, milky white dribbling from her limp cock, her body spasming and twitching, clenching and relaxing in release.

_Got to touch myself, got to stroke, got to fill her, got to come, God, I’ve got to come, I’ve got to..._

...I’ve got to take care of her.

“Does that feel better, your Highness?” he asked, withdrawing his fingers and looking up at her face. She collapsed against the bed, chest heaving, freckled cheeks streaked with tears. Looking now, Castiel wondered how he’d missed the signs that something was unusual about her – her jaw was too square for a woman’s, her voice too low, her hands too big, her chest too flat, her waist too wide, her hips too thin – but the illusion had been so complete, it had never occurred to him to question it. An _entire kingdom, an entire continent, duped by fine dresses and a little make-up._

“Yes, Sir Knight, that was exactly what I needed, thank you,” she whispered weakly. “I should...I should clean up and go to bed.” With effort, she forced her eyes open and sat up.

“Is that how you usually proceed?” he asked, his opinion of King John growing even worse.

“Of course. It’s only modest,” she murmured, looking away bashfully. “Papa said...”

“His Majesty might be King but he isn’t always right.” Castiel couldn’t keep a thread of anger from her voice, and she started. “If I may,” he continued, modulating his tone, an idle thought in his lust-filled head wondering why he cared so much, “I will take care of you. That was difficult for you, right?” She nodded. “And you’re tired now?” She nodded again, the red flush of release slowly fading into the duller pink of affronted modesty. “It won’t take me a minute.”

Fishing through the pile of still-wet belongings he’d left in the corner of the room, Castiel pulled out his soiled shirt and gently used it to wipe the come from her cock, from the bars of the cage confining her, from her thigh where some had dripped free. She shivered at the chill of the cloth but otherwise
didn’t protest. He cleaned away whatever she’d used to slick the way and concluded by wiping his fingers. Her shivering didn’t pass, though she lowered her robe over herself. She looked small and vulnerable, exposed though she was clothed again, but she said nothing, crawling under the covers and turning away from him.

“May I blow out the candle now?” he asked, unsure what to say or how to proceed. He was so turned on his cock hurt, but now that the heat of the moment had passed his shock and amazement were returning. If nothing else, the evening had given him a great deal to think about. She nodded, sweat-dampened hair pooling about her head on the pillow, and Castiel blew out the flame, plunging them once more into darkness. He brushed a hand over the blankets beneath which she lay and she shuddered and whimpered but said nothing. Sad for no reason he could put his finger on, erection fading, Castiel lay back down on the floor. The night was silent, but his thoughts ran a mile a minute.

King John trained his son to be a girl. King John has the audacity to try to marry his son off as a daughter. King John has been touching the boy for years, has convinced him that “he” is “she,” has deceived her into believing that what he’s doing is necessary for her health, intended for her safety – that she needs to be “drained,” that her cock is actually a vagina.

That must be where the mages come in. I’ve heard of fleshcraft, one of the dark arts, forbidden but still practiced in secret. The plan must be that this Inquisitor Alastair will make the conversions necessary and then we will proceed to Vermilion, the Princess a woman in truth.

It seems a pity, she’s such a delicious young man and she doesn’t even realize it. There’s so much I want to teach her, so much I want to show her.

Well, we still have five more weeks of the journey...

A quiet sound reached his ear, the chattering of teeth – the Princess yet awake, still cold.

“Are you always left alone after you’re drained?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Do you like that?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said miserably. “I’m not supposed to enjoy being drained. I’m not supposed to receive pleasure from any man save my husband.”

“But you do enjoy it, don’t you?”

There was a long pause, and then a ghostly, “yes.” Another pause, and she added, “and I hate being alone after.”

That was all the invitation Castiel needed. Climbing onto the bed, he lay atop the covers, giving them layers of cloth to maintain the illusion of the propriety that had, in truth, already been shattered the moment she’d begged for his help. “No, you mustn’t...” Slotting his chest along her back, he wrapped an arm around her. Even through the blankets, he could feel her tension, and then all at once she sighed, eased, curled against him, wiggled an arm free to close her hand over his.

“Thank you, Sir Knight,” she breathed.

“You’re welcome, your Highness,” he mouthed against her neck, giving her warm flesh a gentle kiss.

Whatever else I can say about this, no matter how strange it is, there is no denying that it is the
The bed was plush, the mattress soft, the light filtering through the windows rosy and gold, and the body tucked against Castiel’s was warm and firm and relaxed. The vague sense that he had something he was supposed to do, somewhere he was supposed to be, something he should not be doing, troubled him but for a drowsy minute he was content to ignore those thoughts.

“No – as long as she thinks of herself as a woman, portrays herself as a woman, behaves like a woman, then I must continue to perceive her as a woman, think of her as a woman. Only her biology is that of a male; at the moment she is in every other respect female.

“I’m so sorry, Sir Knight,” she said. “Last night I…this morning…I should never have…”

“It was no bother, your Highness,” Castiel replied, resisting the urge to emphasize that it had, as a matter of fact, been his pleasure to help her with her ‘problem.’ “I wish I’d known sooner that you were in such discomfort. There was no need for you to suffer alone.”

She goggled at him. Was that a faint hint of stubble on her cheeks? It seemed unlikely. If she were to develop facial hair, surely she would have by now. There had been no hair around her cock and balls, either. Perhaps the King had taken a more active role in feminizing his son than Castiel had supposed. Not that it mattered, beyond satisfying Castiel’s curiosity.

“The King your father suggested I should do whatever I must to ensure that you travel in comfort,” Castiel added, prevaricating on the fly.

“He…he did?” she stammered. “He told you to help me with…? No, he wouldn’t have, surely he never would have…”

“No,” Castiel admitted. “He didn’t specify that I help with…draining you…as we did yesterday. But if he knew the state you were in I can’t believe he’d object. Your father loves you very much. He wants you to be happy and comfortable.”

“Oh, Sir Knight.” Deanna shook her head, her tresses no less beautiful for being a bit tangled and sleep-mussed, a fuzzy halo about her face and shoulders. “I wish you’d not said that. I was happier not knowing what a consummate, confident liar you are.”

“But I—”

“No,” she interrupted, pulling the blankets around her pale shoulders. Though the material was not sumptuous, it looked a Queen’s raiment draped about her body. To Castiel’s shock, his heart ached.
duly at the sight. He longed to run his hands over her skin, smooth the fabric off her, caress her beautiful flesh, illicit more lovely noises from her throat. “Sir Knight, you have been solicitous – kind – and I don’t doubt that my father gave you orders to see to my comfort but you are wrong, intensely wrong, irrevocably wrong, if you believe he’d be pleased that you touched me. That’s why, despite the importance of the task, he’s never let any help me save himself and he made sure I left for this trip prepared to do for myself what he had ever done for me. I saw how you reacted last night – you hadn’t the least inkling that such a task might fall to you and there is no conceivable way that Papa instructed you as you suggest.”

*High and Wicked Gods did he do a number on you! Poor boy…*

“You’re right, of course,” Castiel replied diplomatically, thinking fast. “You know your father better than anyone. And he knows you. And that, I’ll admit, troubles me, for he must have known how urgently the need takes you, and to have left you alone? I wished to spare your feelings. I hoped to assuage your concerns and hurt by diverting you to the belief that your father thought ahead to your care in this matter. I should have realized you’d see through the lie. My apologies. I’ll leave you so you may dress now.” Castiel rose, relieved not to have a morning erection after being woken to such pleasant company. Betraying how she aroused him would only complicate matters. Crossing the short distance to the door, he added, “Please understand, Princess, that my lies were told only with your best interest at heart.” *Maybe not originally, but the more I learn of King John? The more I learn of you? The more I want to ensure that man is never again in the same Kingdom as you. I’ve stood by too many times while horrible things were done to innocent people. The reprehensible will always befall someone, but let it happen to those who deserve it. “It would distress me to see you so miserable again. I want you to feel that you can come to me if something is troubling you. I will fetch us breakfast.”*

Castiel pulled the door open, stepped out, and Deanna called after him, “Sir Knight!” Turning back toward the room, he was captured breathless by an image of the divine. Deanna stood beside the bed. Thick folds of blanket draped about her and enhanced her slim form. Her eyes were clear and beautiful, cheeks dappled with freckles, pink lips over-full for a man. “Thank you. For traveling with me, for last night, for this morning – thank you for everything.”

“Any time, Princess,” Castiel replied with a warm smile that wasn’t entirely faked.

Closing the door behind himself, Castiel headed downstairs.

His thoughts raced as he absently asked Ava for the promised eggs, milk and bread. He had so many questions and no answers, only guesses he had no way of confirming.

*What do I do with this information? Should I act differently? Should I do my duty? This is not my Kingdom. I don’t care a whit for duty. I care for my own ass.*

A vision of the Princess, beautiful, vulnerable, and trusting, flitted through his mind.

*Did the King truly think I wouldn’t learn the truth, traveling with her for six weeks? No. Of all his Knights, of all his servants, of all his advisors, he chose me to accompany Deanna on this journey. Only one Knight when a royal entourage would have been appropriate. Only me, when his loyal, true followers are legion.*

The friendly gossip greeted him warmly and went to fetch their breakfast.

*King John is no fool. He knows where my allegiance lies, knows that my motivation is entirely to protect myself. He chose me intentionally. He is counting on my continuing to be a selfish, self-serving man.*
It was a long wait.

*Is there any reason for me not to continue to be a selfish, self-serving man?*

Castiel couldn’t think of any justification for interfering in the natural course of events. The King had instructed Castiel to take Deanna to Ilchester, and then on to Vermilion. It was a task easily completed. Deanna believed herself a woman, put faith in all the sick nonsense that her father had filled her head with. The simplest course for Castiel to pursue would be to do as he’d been told.

He’d never been one to alter his course for mere moral or ethical objections.

And yet…

Taking the surprisingly chilly pitcher of milk from Ava, balancing two plates of fresh-cooked eggs and fragrant, yeasty bread on a platter, Castiel returned upstairs. He knocked, and Deanna answered. While he’d been downstairs waiting, she’d prepared for the day to come. Her riding habit was brushed and clean, not a trace of travel dirt on it; her hair was brushed and braided, shimmering gold when it caught the candle light illuminating the morning-dim room; her face was clean, her eyes bright, her smile warm and welcoming as she gestured him within. Seeing him overburdened, she took the tray from him unasked, set it on the bed, and tugged the washstand over so that he could set the milk down.

And yet…

“Will you join me for breakfast, Sir Knight?” she asked. There was something shy in the way she demurely tucked her feet behind her on the bed, something coy in the way she gazed up at him through her eyelashes, something hopeful to the gleam in her eyes.

And yet…

Castiel was shocked to find that he didn’t *want* to be a party to hurting the Princess. She was beautiful, naïve, innocent, as taken advantage of as any slave Dick Roman ever conducted his sick experiments on, as debased as the most abused of Crowley’s flock. The urge to protect her blossomed hot in Castiel’s chest.

He quelled it.

Meddling with the Princess’ journey, interfering with whatever King John intended for her in Ilchester, was a sure invitation to trouble. Castiel didn’t need trouble. He’d had plenty of that in his life. He needed to keep his head down, get through this job, and go back to Lawrence, where he was safe from those who pursued him still.

*And yet…*

“It would be my pleasure,” Castiel said, sitting carefully opposite her to keep from jostling the tray or spilling the cup that the Princess filled with milk.

*…I don’t want to see her hurt.*

*What the hell is wrong with me? This is not my problem. This is not my responsibility. She is nothing to me.*

He no sooner had the thought than he knew it wasn’t true.

*Damnation.*
Happy New Year, everyone!

Next chapter will be posted Sunday, January 8th!
“Sir Knight,” Deanna breathed hot against his neck, hips hitching back against his hand. Castiel had two fingers buried in her lovely ass, two fingertips rubbing against the sensitive nub within her, and judging by the way she shook against him, she was close to her climax.

_The night is so cold_, had been her excuse when she’d sheepishly asked if they could share a sleeping bag. _The ground is so hard. We could sleep atop my blankets, beneath yours, and be warm and comfortable._ Castiel hadn’t hesitated before accepting. They were two days out from the first night she’d asked him to touch her, two days out from civilization. It would be another two nights before they reached actual accommodations, and until then they were on the road. Though the area was relatively safe, Castiel was still reticent to light a fire and draw attention, and he couldn’t deny that the evenings were surprisingly chill, especially when a breeze kicked up and caused the branches overhead to clatter, the undergrowth to rustle, and their blankets to feel like no protection at all.

Still, none of that could justify why she’d stripped before climbing under the covers with him.

She knew what she wanted.

She simply hadn’t the courage to ask.

Castiel didn’t need her to ask. Feeling her shake apart in his arms was all the reward he needed.

_No. That can’t be right._

His cock was hard and aching and neglected. Instinct demanded that he rut against her as she muffled a faint moan into his shoulder, but he resisted. It was impossible not to imagine replacing his fingers with his dick, impossible not to fantasize about fucking her. Had King John done _that_ for Deanna? Castiel couldn’t imagine that he had. Surely, she’d have said something. As intelligent and observant as she was, she was guileless as regards the King’s sexual mistreatment of her. She’d have seen no reason to keep it a secret if her father had stuck his dick in her. The thought roiled Castiel’s stomach but did nothing to reduce his desire for her.

_I’d be her first._

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Oh, please!” Her voice grew so _low_ when she was close, so _masculine_. The hard cage entrapping her cock pressed painfully into Castiel’s leg, rubbed a spot raw as she worked her hips back against his fingers.

“I’ve got you, Princess,” Castiel promised. He wrapped his free arm around her slim waist, curled his hand around his shoulder and held her close, warm under the blankets.

“I know you do,” she gasped. “I know, I know, I know, I—” She went rigid for a moment, then lax with a whimpering sigh as she came, liquid soaking into Castiel’s breeches and the blankets laid beneath them. He should have planned this better.

“Are you well, your Highness?” he asked gently.

“Very well, thank you.” Her words slurred together, her lips so close to Castiel’s skin that she practically kissed his flesh as she spoke. “I can’t believe I ever didn’t like you.”
Castiel chuckled. “You’re welcome to dislike me to your heart’s content,” he said. “I’ll take care of you regardless, if that’s what you ask of me.”

“Because you’re paid to take care of me?” she asked, surprisingly shrewdly. Perhaps she wasn’t so gone on pleasure as Castiel had supposed.

Well, if King John has done this for her regularly, it’s not as if she’s unaccustomed to the after-glow. And she said he leaves after she comes – after she’s drained – and expects her to clean up herself.

Damn is he a bastard. A brilliant bastard. Created himself the perfect little fucktoy. I’m surprised he’d let her marry anyone else. I’m amazed he didn’t try to keep her home, close, trained and waiting for his pleasure. Because he must have gotten pleasure out of doing this to her. Otherwise, what would have been the point?

Goddamn is he a bastard.

Am I a bastard, too? Is that the kind of person I really want to be, now? Is that the kind of person I want her to think I am?

“Yes,” he admitted. “Your father pays me to care.” He longed to say more, but he wasn’t sure what more he could say. His feelings were too muddled, too confused. She was his job, she was nothing but his job.

The lie was raw on his tongue, burned in his mind.

Shit. What’s happening to me?

“I don’t believe you,” she whispered.

I don’t believe me either.

“Let me clean you up, Princess,” he said, pushing every other thought aside. He couldn’t be bothered to sort through his feeling. Regardless of whether he liked the Princess, come one month’s time he’d deliver her to the Inquisitor, and then to her husband-to-be, or else all hell and multiple armies would rain down on him. She was sweet, and she deserved better, but it was not his problem.

“Thank you, Sir Knight,” she breathed, sighing against the ground. Castiel drew away, tucking the blankets around her as he emerged into the cold night air and walked to where he’d left his pack, still secured to the saddle of his sleeping horse. His hard cock was a heavy weight between his legs, uncomfortable, ungratifiable. Withdrawing a rag – an undershirt he’d brought along that had torn one day while he was gathering firewood – he turned back to her. He’d assumed she’d be lying still, perhaps even asleep, as relaxed as she seemed, so he was surprised to see her up on an elbow, blankets tucked high under her chin and about her ears, hair protected in a braided crown about her head, eyes catching the faint light of night to twinkle like two stars had been pulled down from the heavens.

So beautiful.

Awed, Castiel watched her watching him, helpless to move, pinned by her gaze. With her lip caught between her perfect teeth, she looked him up and down as if she was unaware that he watched her. She scanned his muscled arms, his broad shoulders, his flat belly, every line clear in the light clothes he wore to sleep. Her gaze lingered on the bulge of his cock, her cold-paled cheeks flushing, and to his amazement Castiel felt himself warming as well, felt his own cheeks pinking.

“Here.” Castiel’s voice was harsh in the night and broke the spell. Deanna started and jerked away,
staring at her blanket, and thus was taken unawares when Castiel threw the rag to her. It hit her in the face and she jumped with a squeak. “Clean up your…vagina…and I’ll fetch a robe for you to wear. It’s too cold for you to be bare all night.”


“Anytime, Princess.” He tried to convey as much of a sense of I’m paid to care as he could with two simple words, even as he grew increasingly certain that he cared far more than he was paid to care. How had such emotions crept up on him so quickly, so completely?

What in the five hells was wrong with him?

“Would you…would you call me Deanna?” she asked as she ducked under the covers and tantalizing rustles and mysterious shifts of the blankets spoke to her toweling off her dick.

A moment’s vision stole Castiel’s breath away: himself, lying on his back on the hard ground, settling the Princess as she straddled his hips, encouraging her to lower herself onto him as he used one hand to guide her and the other to hold his erect cock up for her. Just like that, Deanna. Gods above, you feel perfect.

“No.”

This is not my problem. This is not my responsibility. This is good fun. This is a diversion. This is temporary.

Every word rang a hollow lie compared to the hurt in her eyes as she looked at him and then turned away.

Castiel lay awake much of the night, unable to sleep for the conflicting thoughts swirling in his mind. Though Deanna started the evening pointedly apart from him, dividing their makeshift bed into two halves, by the middle of the night she’d curled close to his heat, tucked her face against his neck, worked a leg between his. He let her. It felt nice. He wanted her that close to him, wanted her to want to be that close to him.

Nothing like that had ever happened to him.

Castiel had thought himself in love before, and he’d had lovers before. Jaded men, as worldly as himself, had shared his bed by the dozen when he’d lived in Bootbock. He’d fancied himself truly gone on Bartholomew, and perhaps he’d been in love with Roman, just a little, as Roman had pretended to be in love with Castiel. In general, Castiel had preferred those with power, something to offer, as Castiel offered them physical protection, assurance, strength. He was a bodyguard, a tool in their hands, and they had been tools to him as well, paying him, employing him, guarding him from the enemies that his line of work inevitably brought to his doorstep.

For all that Deanna asked for his help, used his hand to take care of her needs, she didn’t make Castiel feel like a tool. She didn’t have anything to offer Castiel.

King John made Castiel feel like a tool, and not a well-respected one either. As the hour grew later, Castiel grew more fatigued, but sleep eluded him. To his surprise, he found that it bothered him that the King didn’t respect him. John must have realized that Castiel would discover the Princess’ secret when they traveled together, which meant that Castiel was selected because John assumed that, of all his retainers, Castiel would be the least likely to give the least damn that the Princess had been systematically molested and brainwashed by her father since early childhood.
The King was probably right. Castiel was the least likely to mind. He’d been exposed to similar and worse and never blinked.

Yet, in this case, he did mind.

Why?

Deanna sighed, mumbled unhappily, curled her fingers around the bunched-up fabric of Castiel’s shirt, and eased back into whatever unkind dream had caused her momentary disquiet.

I don’t want her to be hurt more.

Why not? She doesn’t even know she’s been hurt. She’s happy. She thinks everything is great.

No. She’s not happy. She feels like a bird in a gilded cage, denied the chance to make a single choice for herself.

Maybe I should tell her the truth?

Learning that she’d been deceived, used, abused, by her beloved, trusted father, would certainly hurt her.

And it’s not my problem! I’m not involved!

Resolving to say nothing, Castiel tried to disengage from the Princess, tried to roll over, but Deanna shook her head, hair tickling Castiel’s chin, and he gave up.

Who was he kidding? He was involved. He was fricken neck deep in the Winchester family sickness.

But that didn’t mean he had to do anything to help her, didn’t mean had to get more involved than he already was.

It was the height of clichéd that the central crossroads in Saint Louis sported a tall signpost with arrows pointing down each road, indicating which city could be reached by traveling in each direction and approximately how many miles separated Saint Louis from the city in question. A dozen roads met at a point like so many spokes on a wagon wheel, and the sign pointed the way to nearly two dozen places. Laughing, Deanna pointed to the one that indicated Bootbock.

“I thought you said it was across the sea,” she said. “Yet this sign claims one can ride to it! Only – only – 1275 miles!”

“It is across the sea,” Castiel grumbled. The same arrow indicated the way to Broward, the main trading port between this continent and the lands across the Far Sea. “It’s a joke, I suppose. This one here indicates someplace mythical.” He pointed at the sign labeled Heaven. Deanna chuckled again. People bustled around them, intent on their business, rolling their eyes at the Princess and Castiel as they gawked like tourists. Circling her horse around the signpost, Deanna paused, staring intently at the labels, and then turned her horse down a well-worn road heading north.

“Not that way,” said Castiel, facing Continental down the road heading due west.

“The sign is very clear,” Deanna objected, pointing. “Vermilion is that way.”

“We’re not going to Vermilion,” Castiel explained. The Princess’ jaw dropped and she said nothing, stunned. “Your father commanded me to take you to Ilchester first.” Clamping her mouth shut,
Deanna’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t give me that suspicious look. I think we’ve managed to establish beyond the shadow of a doubt that I do as I’m paid to do. My life wouldn’t be worth a penny if I kidnapped you. You know me well enough to know value myself considerably higher than that.”

There was a long pause as Deanna considered him, her brow knit. A tradeswoman, heavily laden with packages, cursed Castiel out when he didn’t move out of her way fast enough, but Castiel ignored her, intent on the Princess.

“Why are we going to Ilchester?” she asked at length, stepping Impala aside to make way for a wagon team.

“You have an appointment there with an Inquisitor named Alastair,” said Castiel.


“You’d never heard of Bootbock,” Castiel said acidly. “Your ignorance is not my metric for anything, Princess.” She looked on the verge of angry words, but Castiel cut her off. “The King, your father, has commanded me to take you to Ilchester, and I will do so regardless of your objections, Princess. I’ll tie you to Impala if I must.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Deanna grumbled, but she didn’t argue further. Turning her horse to the west, she forged a path through the throngs, leading the way.

Castiel stared after her, momentarily stunned by how quickly she’d acceded, how little she’d argued when Castiel insisted that this was the King’s will. That she trusted King John so thoroughly was horrifying in light of the truths that Castiel knew.

And had he imagined a hint of interest in her eyes when he suggested tying her up?

He must have imagined it.

Shaking his head, Castiel followed after her, wishing he could trust King John as completely as the Princess did.

*But with what I know he’s done? If even the noble King John Winchester of Lawrence is capable of such duplicitous, bald-faced, self-serving, licentious behavior, I will never trust anyone again.*

Sections of the road to Ilchester were well-maintained; others were dilapidated for miles. When Deanna asked him why, Castiel surmised that past public works projects had been started and continued until the money was depleted or the people were attacked by whatever evil chanced by or a regime change brought a change of priority, at which time the project was abandoned. The section they were on now cut through the Gilded Wood, an ancient forest invaded as minimally as possible in deference to the woodland spirits who lived there. Despite the surrounding wildness, the road was one of the nicest that Castiel had seen yet – macadamized, wide, even, flat, a perfect line sliced through woods so dense that sunlight scarce reached the ground. It was so nice that fear niggled at Castiel that it was a trap or an illusion. Wary, he watched in every direction, a hand on the pommel of his sword.

“Is everything okay, Sir Knight?” asked Deanna. She looked around nervously, her lip caught between her teeth, her grip white-knuckled on her reins. Impala, normally placid, danced with each step, picking up on the prevalent oppression.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Castiel said soothingly. If trouble did come the last thing he needed was for her to fly off the handle.
Gods of my fathers, don’t let her scream…

The Princess made a displeased noise, and Castiel looked to see her sinful lips pursued in an exaggerated pout. “I’m not made of glass,” she huffed. “Sure, I don’t know how to wield a sword or maneuver in all that leather and metal like you do, but I’m not a coward. You’ve noticed something that has you nervous, and I’d like to know what it is.”

Wow, the Princess was hot when she was pissy and demanding. There was a fire to her eyes and passion lent her voice a lovely ring. Bemused, Castiel blinked at her.

“Well?” she demanded.

He started and realized he’d been staring, that Continental had slowed to a casual walk that Deanna’s horse automatically mimicked.

“There’s nothing to be worried about,” said Castiel. “Despite its reputation, the Gilded Wood is perfectly safe.”

In Bootbock, making that statement would have been enough to get them immediately jumped by anyone who overheard, just to give lie to such a ridiculous blanket assumption.

In the Gilded Wood, in the no-mans-land between Lawrence and Ilchester, a bird tweeted, the wind rustled the branches, and nothing of interest happened.

“Then why are you so tense?” the Princess harrumphed, crossing an arm beneath her breasts as she kicked Impala to a brisk walk and steered skillfully, tugging the pack mule behind her. Shadows and sunlight danced, dappled, over her as the wind shifted the canopy overhead. Her freckles, the golden highlights in her hair, and the muted pattern on her riding dress seemed to shift and flow. For a moment, Castiel’s mind sounded the alarm – it’s an illusion, we’re under magical attack! – but he quashed it. They weren’t in danger. Castiel was paranoid because he’d barely slept the night before.

Because of her and her damn kissable mouth and her daring eyes and her slim body and her adorably clueless naiveté and the delicious sounds she makes when I help her masturbate.

I help the Princess of Lawrence masturbate.

I’m a lucky man.

There was a crack of branches in the dense forest to their left, and Castiel wheeled in his saddle so quickly that Continental stumbled. Amidst the thick tree trunks, there was so little light that Castiel could make out nothing.

“What’s that?” Deanna frowned.

“I don’t…”

“There’s a glow,” she said, pointing.

Castiel couldn’t see it, but he felt vindicated for his vigilance. “It’s surely a will-o-the-wisp. Pay it no mind.”

“But it’s beautiful,” she objected. “And it’s gesturing for me to follow.”

“Princess, no, you shouldn’t—”

Ignoring Castiel’s objections, she turned her horse towards the woods and, somehow, picked a path
amidst the trees. Moments before, it hadn’t looked like there would be space enough for the bulk of a horse to pass through, yet the way cleared before her though Castiel didn’t see the trees moving. The well-trained mare picked her way daintily over tree roots, and with a muttered oath Castiel turned to follow, fearing that the path that opened so readily for the Princess would seal to separate them.

At some point soon, Castiel would have to consider why the mere thought of being parted from his charge made his chest ache.

He did not want to think about that.

“Princess, this is a terrible idea,” Castiel objected, close on the tail of the pack mule. “We should return to the road. The creatures of the forest do not appreciate intruders. By long-standing agreement, the King’s Highway is maintained and respected, but if we delve into their lands, they—”

“Hush,” Deanna interrupted, waving a discouraging hand at him, the same gesture she might have used to shove away an over-enthusiastic, yipping dog. “There’s no harm here. I’d know if there were.”

“That’s ridiculous! You—”

“I said hush,” she repeated. “The only one disturbing them is you.”

Snapping his mouth shut, Castiel realized uneasily that she was right. The Princess’ path was wide with ample head room, uncrowded and smooth; branches and tree trunks crowded ominously close to Castiel, branches clacking. Untroubled, Deanna rode on, path winding and wending as she followed whatever glow drew her on. All Castiel saw was dense shadows and the Princess’ back. Scowling, he followed.

They rode for some time. Their path roughly paralleled the road, he thought, though it was difficult to tell when they were continually skirting tree boles so thick that a half-dozen large men holding hands could not have reached around them. Alert, tense, Castiel reacted to every sound – snapping branches, twittering birds, squirrels chittering and squabbling overhead, rustling in the bed of leaves that carpeted the ground. His hand constantly twitched toward his sword.

Whatever comes for her, I’ll stop them.

The Princess’ back was supple, her hips rolled easily with Impala’s gait. Castiel had spent most of the trip riding in front of her; from behind, he continually watched her lithe form, unable to stop himself from picturing the lovely, pale skin he knew to be concealed beneath her riding habit, when he should be watching their surroundings.

A moan burst from the Princess as her hips rocked against Castiel’s crotch, as her ass clenched around his dick.

“Sir Knight,” she whimpered. “Oh…” She straddled him as he lay on the ground, facing away from him, her hands wrapped around his knees as she rode him just like she rode her horses – the same twist to her spine, the same roll to her hips, identical movements save for how her ass spread around Castiel’s cock.

“Just like that, Princess,” Castiel encouraged, voice cracking gutturally. She ground her hips down on his pelvis and he groaned.

“Feels so good,” she breathed. “So much better than…’
“I know,” said Castiel. “That’s what I want – to make you feel good.”

“You do – you do – so good!”

Surging up from the ground, Castiel wrapped his arms around the Princess’ shoulders, shoved her forward, and ignored her shocked gasp. Dislodging her hold on his knees, Castiel seized her body, supporting her weight, got one hand on the ground and the other around her captured cock and balls, and used his leverage to fuck hard into her gorgeous body. Words bubbled from her, shattered into grunts each time he slammed into her.

“Go – od – so – go – o – o – ood—”

With his other hand, Castiel kneaded the delicate flesh of her balls and she moaned and threw her weight back against him and—

“Sir Knight!”

“Yes, your highness, yes, yes—”

“Sir Knight!” Deanna’s voice, harsh, alarmed, cut through Castiel’s fantasy. Dazed, he snapped back to himself. How had he drifted off so completely? The forest had lulled him, must have done. Whatever faults Castiel had, he was damn good at his job.

“Is everything okay, Highness?” he managed. His voice was low, as it grew when he was aroused, and his hard cock knocked uncomfortably against his saddle. Blinking, he tried to clear his delusion, but some part of his mind yet lingered on the beautiful sounds that Deanna had made, the way she’d moved, how glorious it had felt to be inside her, and—

“I asked you what you thought?” she said uncertainly.

“What?” he asked, puzzled.

“Are you unwell?” she demanded.

Wait. She was facing him. There was sunlight. He was so focused on her, so focused on himself, that he’d scarce taken in their surroundings.

“My apologies,” stammered Castiel. “I’m such a bumbling fool for her that I scarce recognize myself. What in the hells is going on? I wasn’t paying attention.” She gave him a frustrated moue and made a gesture toward the vista behind her.

A crystalline waterfall shimmered as it splashed over a fall of mossy rocks. Mist filled the air, a sparkling rainbow that eddied and swirled in the light breeze. A small flock of multi-colored birds flitted and flapped, drinking the water, dancing and preening in the burbling flow. The susurrations of flowing water made a beautiful counterpoint to lilting birdsong. Having gotten his attention, Deanna turned back to survey the sheltered glade; she watched, mouth ajar, eyes wide with wonder, as a large wading bird descended through the glowing, brilliant green of backlit leaves and alit in the water with hardly a splash. Her cheeks brightened with excitement, her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths, and she raptly took in every detail. She was captivated, and Castiel was captivated by her.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she breathed. “How could even you be oblivious to such wonder?”

I’m not, dear Gods I’m not, you are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.

Perhaps it’s not such a surprise that I’m falling so quickly. I’ve never met someone so guileless, so
open, so curious, so intelligent, so effortlessly flawless.

“It is lovely,” Castiel agreed, but he only had eyes for Deanna. “One of the loveliest…places…I’ve ever seen.”

“I want to travel the world, Sir Knight,” she breathed, turning slowly in adorable mimicry of the progress of a turtle swimming across the rippling pond. “Do you think any woman or man has ever laid eyes on this place before? And the forest wanted to show me. How many other remarkable places are there? I want to see them all.”

What I feel toward her cannot be.

“Truly,” said Castiel as harshly as he could manage. Deanna started and tensed as if he’d struck her. “But we must get to Ilchester on schedule. We haven’t time for flights of fancy.”

“You’ve never had a flight of fancy in your life,” she grumbled.

Let me tell you about my fantasies…they involve you, fucking me into the ground…

Biting his tongue, Castiel forced his expression to impassivity, hardness, disdain. “I have, to my detriment. You are a Princess.” I am a knight. “You have duties.” I have duties. “When you are wed, I’m sure your husband will build you whatever beautiful gardens you could wish.” Were I a better man, I would fight for you, but I am not that man. “You have a lifetime to indulge in every daydream that flits by you.” I don’t dare become that man.

I would kill for you, Princess, but life is cheap and I have killed for many, and killed many, deserving and undeserving.

“Very well,” she whispered, subdued. Tears glistered in her eyes, a lovely, sad mirror of the spectacular scene arrayed before them. The woods seemed to pick up her mood; the birds trilled more softly, the trees rustled forlornly, even the splashing of the waterfall seemed mournful. The trunks behind Castiel more looming and threatening.

But I’m starting to suspect that I would die for you, as well.

And that terrifies me.

There were questions – so many questions – to be answered: about the luring forest, about Deanna’s future, about the feelings that Castiel could no longer pretend weren’t festering under his skin, but he repressed them all. Deanna looked to him to lead, trusted him to protect her, sometimes seemed to care for him despite his efforts to discourage her. Castiel’s job was to complete his mission, to see her delivered safe and sound to Inquisitor Alastair and then on to her future husband.

“Let’s go,” he snapped. Turning his horse, Castiel led the way back toward the road.

At least the trees parted for him as they had for Deanna.

At least she followed.

He could hear the soft sound of her weeping, melding and flowing with the sound of the rushing waterfall behind them.

Being soft-hearted inevitably got Castiel in trouble. Deanna – no, her Highness, the Princess – was worming her way beneath his armor, exploiting every chink.
He had to be harder.

Resisting the urge to turn back and comfort her, Castiel rode on. The Princess had never had a choice, and it wasn’t for Castiel to offer her options. It was for Castiel to journey with her and then return to his life in Lawrence as if none of this happened.

*Will I be able to serve under King John again, knowing that he is no better than Crowley and Roman, knowing that he could do such harm to such a sweet, innocent, lovely, brilliant creature?*

*Yes.*

*Because I have no heart.*

*I cannot afford to have a heart.*

The ache in Castiel’s chest couldn’t be his heart. The pain that made it hard to breathe couldn’t be because he cared.

The only person Castiel cared about was himself.

Behind him, Deanna wept, and Castiel steeled himself until he truly believed he didn’t care.

But he knew that if she came to his blankets that night, he’d welcome her.

And if she didn’t, he’d miss her.

Chapter End Notes


Remember you can always follow me on Tumblr for more information on my going’s on: unforth-ninawaters.tumblr.com.
“Sir Knight?” Deanna called. Gritting his teeth against a groan, Castiel pressed his back hard into the trunk of the tree on which he leaned and stroked himself harder.

“Just another minute, Princess,” he ground out. “Wait over there. It would be inappropriate for you to see me bathing.”

He wasn’t bathing.

Pleasure bombarded his senses. Finally, finally, he’d stolen away to touch himself. The Princess had ceased seeking his company after their foray into the forest, but Castiel hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her – obsessing about her, if he was honest with himself. He craved her companionship, craved her touch, craved her return to his bedroll as a parched man craved water. In constant company, he’d had no opportunity to take care of himself, and his cock ached with the need for release, sore from so many nights of essential self-denial.

Twisting his wrist, Castiel pressed his thumb roughly against the slit of his cock and, with a choked off groan, he came. He’d not had a single opportunity to masturbate in the days since he’d started helping the Princess. Coming was painful; he shuddered and panted as thick ropes of come drenched his hand and he slammed his head back against the tree.

“Sir Knight?” called Deanna again, breathless, just before she hastened into view. Her eyes alit on him and she froze.

Castiel’s cock was in his hand, his come dripped thick onto the forest floor, his cheeks were hot, his head throbbed duly, and a surprising burst of shame filled him.

I’ve nothing to be ashamed of. She’ll be married in a month, and she’s 18. She should know what men do to pleasure themselves. She should know that men have dicks, just like she does. She should know she’s a man before she is made a woman in truth.

She should have the right to make that choice for herself.

No. It’s not my problem.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” said Castiel, unhurriedly stuffing his cock back into his breeches. “I did ask you to wait.”

“Were you…masturbating?” she asked, even more breathless than before. “Was that your penis?”

“Oh, your Highness, I knew you were naïve but do you mean to tell me that you’ve never even seen a naked man before?” Castiel said mockingly, wiping come off on a thick tree root that rose from the loam beneath him.

“I’m not naïve,” the Princess huffed. “My innocence has been maintained, true, as befits a woman of my station, but—” Castiel couldn’t help but smile at her show of effrontery, and she cut off. “You delight in getting a rise out of me! Forget that I asked. It’s none of my business.”

Do I ever! You are never more beautiful than when you are ablaze with passion. I’d like to get a rise
“Yes, I was masturbating,” Castiel replied. Deliberately, he stood and put hands to the flap of his breeches. Judging by how she stared, his cock yet showed, and Castiel was entranced by how fascinated Deanna was by Castiel’s masculinity. “And yes, that was my penis.”

“Your body is more like my body than I expected,” she said thoughtfully. “I knew my father… I’ve caught glimpses… he explained to me, once, that even for a family member, helping drain a woman like myself could be arousing. It made me uncomfortable, but—” She broke off and flushed crimson.

“That is to say… I mean… Gods below, why do you— how do you—” Looking away as Castiel buttoned his breeches closed, she fixed her gaze on a nondescript portion of the ground. “I’m ready to continue whenever you are, Sir Knight,” she said. “You took so long bathing that I wished to check on you.”

“Thank you,” said Castiel with a smirk. “I’m ready now.”

“Excellent.”

Deanna led the way back to their small camp, stiff-backed and tense. Castiel trailed behind, admiring the sway of her slim hips and the way the swish-swish of her skirts accentuated her movements, made the mundane sensuous. The more he learned about the King, the more disgusted he grew, and the more he wished to see Deanna freed from the plan that her father had created for her. The implication that the King had not only been aroused by getting his son – daughter? – off, but had also betrayed that arousal to her and compounded his multitude of sins by lying to her and saying that it was normal was almost the last straw. Castiel itched to tell her the truth, to explain to her how she’d been used.

Almost the last straw?

If that’s not enough, what would be? Finding out that he’d raped her? How, really, is what he did different than rape? Only in that he somehow convinced her that she liked it, that it was common, that she should expect such treatment. The ways he violated her are too manifold to list.

“Your Highness——”

“Mount up,” she interrupted curtly, untying the leads that kept the horses from straying and shoving Continental’s reins at Castiel. “We are falling behind schedule. We mustn’t be late to meet my betrothed.”

What was Castiel thinking? Of course he couldn’t tell her. Soon, it would cease to be an issue anyway. They’d get to Ilchester, the mage would do whatever fleshcrafters did, and if there was any mercy in the world Deanna would never understand the difference, never comprehend what had been done to her.

Though if she breathes a word of what she thinks common and normal to Prince Michael…

… why assume that he doesn’t know? Why assume that King John hasn’t yet again compounded his sins by telling her husband-to-be what a docile fuck toy he groomed and trained? Why assume that this Michael is any less horrific than her father? It seems so unfathomable that King John would give Deanna up after turning her into his ideal sexually submissive daughter; to what kind of man would he give her? Surely one just like him.

“Of course not,” murmured Castiel, words vague as he tried to form a coherent sentence without bursting out every word of his racing thoughts. He mounted effortlessly. “Don’t worry, Princess. I’ll
get you where you need to be.”

Either way, it was not Castiel’s problem.

“I’m not worried,” she snapped. “I simply wish this journey to be over as quickly as possible. Traveling with you is…onerous.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” he said glibly.

“No, you’re not.”

You shouldn’t like me, Princess. I’m a terrible person, because I won’t tell you the truth and for so many other reasons. I am not the one to save you from your fate. I am not the noble knight to save the damsel – lad? – in distress. I am a blackguard, through and through. Always have been, always will be.

It is too late to save either one of us, has been too late for a decade or longer.

“No, I’m not.”

They didn’t speak again for the rest of the day.

Dozing lightly, Castiel grumbled as he shifted on the uncomfortable pallet bed. They were two and a half weeks out from Lawrence. It had been almost a week since the last time Deanna had let him touch her. They’d found a small roadside inn to sleep at for the night. The accommodations were meager. Deanna had the finest room in the building and it was scarce an improvement on Castiel’s mediocre room: a thin, narrow bed with a flimsy straw mattress, a wash stand with cold brown water in the pitcher, a grimy window that looked out on a stinking stable, and wood floorboards so rough that Castiel had gotten a splinter through his thick wool socks.

Castiel had given up his attempts to seduce the Princess.

The temptation remained, but the genuinely tender feelings she stirred in Castiel’s breast needed to be quashed. If that meant relinquishing the aim of bedding her, then so be it. There were many pretty young men in the world.

But I want her.

Since the Princess caught him masturbating, since Castiel had deliberately pushed her away, she had ceased speaking to him. Their journey resumed the rhythm it had the first few days, before she had opened up to him, before he deliberately worked on making himself appealing to her. They rode by day, taking occasional breaks, pushing on at a good pace that would see them punctually arrived in Ilchester. Gone were the Princess’ astute questions and endearing curiosity. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed on the road, fixed ahead, fixed on her future, with her mouth set in a tight line and her shoulders tense even as her lovely ass rolled and rolled to the gait of the horse.

No. Stop staring at her ass. Stop thinking about her ass.

The country through which they passed was fertile and fascinating. Rolling hills created three distinct terrains. The slopes of the hills were thickly forested, dense with felled foliage and creeping vines that rustled continually with the scurrying of animals and the pecking of birds questing for berries. The peaks were barren, rock-strewn, top soil scoured away to reveal the bedrock beneath, striated as if some monstrous beast had raked the ground with its claws – most likely a dragon, Castiel thought as he hustled them back into the safety of the woods each time they crested the exposed heights.
Castiel had fought too hard to survive to risk dying because an enormous winged snake wanted lunch. The valleys were where people dwelled, prime farmland a multi-hued mosaic of different crops. The hills ran in long ridge lines. The road they traveled was the only one that ran perpendicular to the hills; crossroads intersected their route in every valley, and at each crossroads, there was a village. If they timed things correctly, they could pass through three such villages a day. If they timed things wrong, they slept in the forest or, once, in the homestead of an obliging farm family.

Stop wishing that the time would pass more slowly. Stop yearning to slow the journey down to prolong your time with her.

Castiel wanted to tell the Princess about the lay of the land, wanted to discuss where those crossroads led, wanted to share his knowledge of the world. When they passed through a small market and Deanna looked with longing at a stand selling carved jade figurines, Castiel wanted to explain to her that those came from his hometown of Bootbock, that they’d traveled a more than a thousand miles to reach that market, that they’d crossed an ocean and been hauled down a road, each sculpture wrapped in muslin to protect the fragile stone from cracking. When Deanna gazed with wonder at the parallel tears to the stone of the hills, Castiel wanted to tell her of dragons, to explain why people didn’t dare live on the hilltops, to challenge her to consider what other ways those stones might have been torn. When the road was fronted by a thicket of berries, when they passed a stand of apple trees, when they crossed over the traces of a deer run, Castiel wanted to tell her of the wilds, to show her how to recognize what was edible and what was poisonous, to demonstrate for her how to set a trap to catch a rabbit, a deer, a bear, and how to prepare each for cooking.

Stop missing her questions. Stop longing to show her things. Stop looking around for ways to divert her.

Castiel said nothing.

Deanna said nothing.

The journey passed in stultifying, agonizing silence.

A faint sound broke through Castiel’s sleepy reverie. The soft, rhythmic clatter of wood on wood spoke to the Princess trying to take care of herself in the room next door. Flimsy walls scarce blocked a sound; fully awake and attentive, Castiel could even hear her heavy breathing. His cock stirred and he rolled over, stuffed the lumpy pillow over his head and tried to ignore both her need and his own. Indulging this fantasy was dangerous. Pursuing her was dangerous. He couldn’t afford to feel for her. He couldn’t afford to lose his position in Lawrence. He couldn’t afford to interfere. He couldn’t afford to care.

Coward.

Yes. Not for the first time, and not for the last. Brave men die.

“Please…” The Princess’ breathy voice ghosted over Castiel’s skin like a touch, as close as if the wall had crumbled to dust.

Ignore her.

The thumping of her bed against the adjoining wall grew louder, more rapid.

Ignore her.

“Oh, please…”
Ignore her.

“I can’t…”

Ignore her.

“Help me, Castiel, please help me.”

The softness of her voice made it clear she didn’t intend him to hear, surely had no idea that he could hear, but her desperation was patent. Castiel’s chest ached and his eyes, to his shock, stung. Not granting her wish for relief physically pained him. He suspected it would mentally pain him, as well, if only he would let himself actually think, actually feel, instead of trying desperately, continually, to repress every emotion that she stirred in him.

“Only you, no one but you. Please, please, please…”

The words faded to incoherent mumbles and Castiel’s resolve crumbled. Casting aside his scratchy blankets, he rose, went to the door, unlocked it, exited to the hall, and covered the few steps to her door. It was a small mercy that in the hallway she was less audible, but anyone walking by would still easily recognize that she was touching herself.

And probably assume by the pitch of her voice that she is a man.

After a moment’s more hesitation, during which a distressed whimper interrupted the quiet of the night, Castiel lifted a hand and knocked.

The noises in the room ceased abruptly.

Deanna didn’t answer.

“Your Highness?” Castiel asked. His voice sounded unnaturally loud and deep to his ears.

“Sir Knight?” she replied meekly.

“Do you…” He trailed off, took a deep breath, and tried again. “If you want my assistance…I’m happy to give it.”

“I’m sure you are,” she replied, bitterness obvious even through the wood of the door. “That’s what you’re paid to do, right?”

“I’m sorry, Princess,” said Castiel. “You deserved a traveling companion with genuine loyalty and true compassion for your plight.” As opposed to my bought-and-paid-for loyalty and self-serving compassion. “You deserved a traveling companion who was personable, friendly, caring, engaging.” Instead of standoffish, distant, arrogant, aloof, rude. “You deserved a lovely journey, a chance to spread your wings one last time before your marriage.” Rather than a taskmaster who forces you back to the road and forbids you from taking joy in the beauty of a waterfall. “I don’t know why your father chose me as your entourage for this journey as opposed to any of the more qualified Knights in his service.” Your father chose me because my qualifications were precisely what he needed – someone selfish, self-interested, and loyal for all the wrong reasons. “But I’m here, and I will see to your care, and I will see you safe in the arms of your husband-to-be.” But not before I see you remade against your will. “Accept my aid or not, as you will.”

I should not be standing here. I should not be speaking. I should leave her to suffer in solitude. Even caring this much is dangerous for me, and perhaps for her as well. I do not want to bring her to be crafted into a woman. I do not want to deliver her into the arms of another. I do not want to see her
sadd, to cause her sadness.

I do not want to give up everything I have been, everything that I’ve become, for her.

And she deserves someone who would do that for her. She is worth self-immolation, self-destruction, but I am not the man to do that for her.

With a creak, the door opened a crack. By the flickering light of a single smoky tallow candle, Deanna looked up through her long lashes at him. Thick, rough brown wool draped over her shoulders and hid her nudity.

“I don’t understand you,” she whispered. The flame guttered and swayed in her breath and reflected light danced golden in her dark eyes, picked out the highlights in her long, smooth tresses.

“Honestly? Right now, I don’t understand myself,” confessed Castiel.

Bullshit. I know exactly what I want.

All this dancing around and self-justification isn’t like me. I’m pragmatic. That’s my strength – examine a situation, assess the best approaches, and pick the most logical one regardless of sentiment, regardless of who it hurt. None of this prevarication, none of this hemming and hawing.

I want the Princess.

I want to help the Princess.

I know the consequences of doing so.

And I want to anyway.

Wordlessly, staring into his shadowed face, Deanna opened the door wide enough for Castiel to step into her room, moving out of the way to allow him entrance. She closed the door behind him, crossed the narrow space to the bed, and silently lay down on her stomach, knees up to hitch her ass in the air. The blanket fell away, and in the candle light she looked like a delectable golden Goddess, ripe for the taking.

“No,” Castiel breathed. Choice and agency had been stolen from her too many times. He was fed up with her complaisance – disgusted by his prior willingness to participate in her degradation. She turned to look at him, tears in her eyes, and she clawed for the blankets and looked away in shame. “No,” he repeated. “On your back, highness. I want…” He shook his head. This wasn’t about what he wanted. “I know you like when I can hold you close. Draining you isn’t something I do to you. It’s something I do for you.” The ghost of a smile twisted her lips and she rolled to her back, spread her legs, and looked a surprisingly coy invitation toward him, holding out one arm invitingly.

Castiel’s feet carried him forward before he consciously thought about what he was doing. His knee caught the edge of the bed, lifted him, and he settled above her easily, one arm holding him up over her, the other seeking her hot, needy hole. She gasped, her back arching, as he sank a finger deep into her slickness. Her ass ground against his knuckle, her head strained against the mattress, and her eyes squeezed shut, tears catching at the corners as she moaned in relief. She must have been trying to get herself off for a while, for she was loose and open and wet, and Castiel thrust his finger in only once before deciding she was ready for a second, and he withdrew, spread her, and sank back in deeply.

“Yes,” she breathed. “That feels—”
“Hush, Princess,” he murmured. “We don’t want the whole house to hear. Relax and let me take care of you.”

The tight nub of sensitive nerves gave easily under his fingers, and the Princess squirmed and bit her lips against another moan. Her hips rolled into his hand as he massaged within her. She was hungry for tender touch, starving for it, desperate, and Castiel knew it wouldn’t take long before she came. She was so pliable under his skilled fingers, and his thoughts ran away, imagining how it would feel to lie atop her, to fill her, to fuck her until she screamed with bliss and begged him to never stop.

An arm curled around his waist and Castiel was so shocked that for a moment he thought he was still lost in his fantasy. Straining muscles tugged at him, a fervent voice whispered, “please,” and Castiel realized it was very real. Deanna was holding him, urging him to lower his hips.

I shouldn’t…

It’s what she wants. It’s her choice.

Castiel obliged her. Keeping his fingers buried within, he settled his weight straddling one of her legs. His hard cock pressed against her bony hip; the metal cage that bound her dick dug uncomfortably into his thigh, and it was all he could do not to rut himself senseless in tempo to the steady rub, rub, rub of his fingers within her channel.

“Your penis is hard,” she breathed. “That means you’re attracted to me, right?”

“Yes,” he groaned, hips giving one jerk to get a taunting flash of friction against his aching erection. “I want you so much it scares me, your Highness.”

“I don’t understand why you say cruel things to me. I don’t understand why you help me. I don’t understand why you want me. I don’t understand why I want you. I don’t understand what I want from you. Sir Knight—”

“Castiel,” he ground out, hips rolling against her again.

“It feels so good, Castiel,” she whimpered. “I want to pleasure you. Tell me how to pleasure you!”

This wasn’t a fantasy. This was really happening to him.

Grinding to halt, Castiel hovered over her, trembling and panting. “Wrap your…wrap your hand around my cock…your Highness…”

“Deanna,” she implored.

“Deanna,” Castiel echoed, and she moaned. Her arm left his waist, trailed along his side, slipped between their bodies, and she tried to wrap her fingers around his length through the fabric of his pants. “No…” Pulling his fingers from her ass, Castiel skimmed along her inner thigh, trailed up his belly, leaving a trail of oil behind. She whimpered and bucked beneath him, then stilled herself, trembling. Fumbling, Castiel undid the buttons on the front of his pants, grabbed her hand and pulled it to his thickened cock. Her touch was tentative, her eyes wide with wonder, and every gentle, exploratory brush of flesh on flesh exploded pleasure behind his eyes.

Sex had never felt like this before.

“Take your time,” he said roughly. He left her to her exploration and returned to fingering her, pressing deep into her suddenly, aggressively, and she broke off her uncertain touches to moan and pant and curl against his hand. As he built up a rhythm again, she mimicked him, touching his cock
nervously, then with increasing confidence, until she finally wrapped long, hot fingers around his length and stroked upwards. Castiel groaned. “You can…you can tighten your fist – just a little! – and…” Following his instructions, her grip firmed and she stroked him again and he broke off with another groan. She was inept, inexperienced, timid, and absolutely amazing. No inhibitions impeded her; everything she felt, she expressed. Everything she wanted, her body language made clear. Everything that pleasured her, she moaned quietly into the night air. Watching her unravel around him had been spectacular each time they’d been together, but helping her bravely take what she wanted was even better.

Matching his tempo, Deanna stroked Castiel, and though he was usually not an expressive lover, he found himself matching her intensity, matching her passion. He was so gone that at first he didn’t realize that she was experimenting – trying different speeds, different grips, different movements. Even in the throes of bliss, she was intelligent enough and caring enough to test and assess his reactions. Each stroke, she got better at touching him, better at pleasuring him, and more quickly than he’d have imagined, Castiel was on the verge of coming just from a hand job. Praise leaked from his mouth, “Just like that…that feels good, Deanna, love the sounds you make…” And she whimpered and squirmed and moaned and thrust and stroked and stroked and stroked.

A hand tangled in his hair from nowhere, pulled Castiel’s head down, and slammed their lips together. It was a sloppy kiss, their first, but Deanna’s eyes slipped shut as if she’d found bliss and with a deep, unfeminine sound that caught in her throat, she came, lips working against his lips, hips working against his knuckles, hand working against his cock.

“You’re the most beautiful creature I’ve ever beheld,” Castiel whispered against her mouth. Her eyes opened, overflowing with impassioned tears, unfocused pupils obvious in the dim, sputtering light of the candle, and her hand stilled, her body going lax against the mattress.

“It feels so good when I’m with you,” she replied, words slurring as her head lolled to the side. “With Papa it was never…it’s different with you and it’s so good.” Her hand twitched and she abruptly realized she was still holding his hard cock. “I’m sorry, I should—”

“No,” Castiel interrupted, brushing a kiss over her lips. “You’ve done plenty. If you’ll keep your hand there, I’ll just…” Rather than try to explain, he demonstrated, thrusting his hips into her loose grip. She moaned as if Castiel was fucking her in truth, but she held her hand steady, kept her grip firm, and Castiel painted kisses along her smooth jawline, cheek, and lips as he steadily fucked her hand. Her free hand caressed up and down Castiel’s back – she clearly wanted to do something with it but couldn’t figure out what would be appropriate – and she weakly reciprocated every kiss, murmuring incoherently all the while. Her breath was hot on his cheek, strangely sweet when he inhaled it, and her cheeks glowed with happiness and contentment.

At this rate, she might let me fuck her before we reach Ilchester.

With a deep groan, ripped from him at the mere thought of burying his cock in Deanna’s gorgeous body, Castiel came. The Princess watched, wide-eyed, mouth agape, chest fluttering with rapid breaths, the flesh beneath Castiel twitching as his come splattered onto her skin.

“That was…that was good?” she asked timidly, licking her lips.

“Very good,” Castiel agreed, voice broken and guttural. He stilled, cock still dripping. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his heart raced. “You’re a fast learner, Princess.”

The use of her title hit her like a splash of cold water; the happiness vanished from her face and she turned from him, dropped her hand, brought her legs together, crimson shame diffusing down her cheeks, her neck, her chest. The change hurt more than Castiel had imagined it might. He wanted her
open and pliable in his hands, wanted her to welcome his touch, wanted her pleased, dazed smiles when she was sated, wanted to hold her until she slept, wanted to wake her up with his cock buried in her heat, fucking her to climax while she lay half-asleep and needy beside him.

*Why am I fighting this so hard? What, really, do I have to lose?*

“I’m sorry, Deanna,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss behind her ear.

*I’ll lose her. When she goes to Ilchester and becomes a woman in truth – when she goes to Vermilion and weds Prince Michael.*

*I don’t want them to have her. I don’t want to give anyone else the chance to hurt her.*

*I want her all for myself, just the way she is right now. Absolutely perfect.*

“For making love to me?” she asked bitterly.

“For confusing you,” he explained. “For making you feel like I don’t want you for you. For not…” He shook his head, unable to bring himself to say the rest. *For not saving you. For not protecting you from your father all these years. For not being a better man, a man you deserve. For not keeping my hands off you. For taking advantage of how you’ve been abused. For so many reasons, the list goes on and on.* “I wish I could be your Knight.”

“You still could be…” she trailed off hopefully, but Castiel shook his head and she sighed sadly.

“May I stay the night…Deanna?”

Answering without words, Deanna curled onto her side and made room for him on the bed. Wrapping one arm beneath her head, the other around her waist, trapping both her thin legs beneath one of his, Castiel knew that whatever else awaited them in the future, they’d spend every remaining night of the trip entwined in each other’s arms.

Castiel didn’t allow himself to think beyond that.

“Will you look at *that* fine piece of pie?” A burly man sitting among a group of merchant’s guards at a table in the corner of the common room smacked his neighbor in the arm and gestured in the Princess’ direction. Turning toward them scowling, Castiel put a hand on his sword and stared the bravo down sternly. Instead of appearing cowed, the man shot Castiel a challenging look and knocked another of his friends on the shoulder. The entire group – six large, tough men – turned to leer at Deanna.

“Love ‘um sweet and young and innocent.”

Returning his gaze to his charge, anger choked hot at Castiel’s throat as he saw the effect the lewd behavior had on her. The Princess quailed, her shoulders hunched, her head lowered as if to minimize the space she took up. She looked like she wished she could disappear.

“Sweet and young? Absolutely. Innocent? Bull’s balls. Bet she’s a whore.”

*If they lay one stinking hand on her…*

Castiel put a possessive hand gently on Deanna’s lower back. She started as if he’d struck her, looked up at him through tear-filled eyes. “Perhaps we should leave,” Castiel murmured. She shook her head – not as if she was disagreeing, but as if she hadn’t a clue how to reply or how to react.
“Well, if she’s not now, she will be by the time we’re done with her!”

Something in Castiel broke, rage boiling over in a way he hadn’t felt since Roman had arbitrarily decided that Castiel was a tool with better uses than as a bodyguard, decided to use Castiel as leverage in his war with Crowley. Unsheathing his sword, Castiel crossed the room to them.

“Hey, no fighting in my tavern!”

“Aww, look at her little guard puppy. You gonna bark at us, lapdog? You gonna—”

Without acknowledging the taunt, Castiel ran his sword through the guts of the man who had initiated the disgusting scene. Stunned, the man looked down at the blade, looked up at Castiel, and slumped to one side, eyes rolling back in his head. Blood burbled around the blade, soaked into his clothes, and dripped to the floor.

“Holy hell fire!” one of the others cried, jumping to his feet, fists raised aggressively.

“I’m not fighting,” Castiel grated out. “I’m proving a point. Who’s next?” Withdrawing his blade with a wet squelch, Castiel held it at the ready and looked a challenge at the remainder of the group. One half-rose, but his companion put a restraining hand on his arm, staring agape at Castiel. The common room was deathly silent. Blood made an eerily loud plop-plop-plop as it splattered on the floor.

A throat cleared behind him. Turning, Castiel saw Deanna standing close at his shoulder. The tension and fear were gone from her body, and if the sight of death disturbed her, she gave no sign of it. On the contrary, she looked empowered, brave, confident; her eyes shone bright and fearless. She regally stared down at the man who’d risen and he dropped his fists and sank back into his chair.

“Thank you, Sir Knight.” Her voice rang like a trumpet’s clarion call in the astonished silence. “I don’t think further demonstrations will be necessary.”

“Are you sure?” Castiel stared down one of the others, a large man who looked absurd trying to hide in his chair. “This lot seems unusually stupid. Perhaps a second example should be made?”

Deanna’s eyes sparkled and her lips quirked into a slight smile. “Not today. We’ll have no more trouble from this lot. Right?”

“Right!”

“Of course not!”

“We’re so sorry, my lady!”

“But they killed—”

“Shut up. Do you want to die?”

“But we outnumber—”

“I said stuff it!”

Deanna’s smile widened, showing a hint of teeth. She beamed at Castiel, and he had never seen anyone more magnificent.

“Oh…oooooh,” Deanna breathed into the still night air.
“Do you like that?” Castiel asked roughly. His lips were chapped, and though they’d just started, his voice was already rough. A week spent together every night, a week during which she’d stroked him to climax every night, a week spent with her sighing and moaning and wiggling against him as he fingered her, and yet the Princess still drove him wild faster than anyone he’d ever shared a bed with.

“But…isn’t it gross?” she asked for the umpteenth time. “Aren’t you—” Castiel pressed his tongue into her ass, freshly cleaned with a rag and the crystalline clear spring water pumped from the well in the village where they spent the night. She moaned, sinful, long and low, and Castiel pressed into her deeper, teasing forth more tantalizing noises.

They’d had scant privacy in the week since they’d started sharing a bed every night.

Tonight, they had a modest cabin to themselves.

Castiel intended to make the most of their time together.

They were only a week’s journey from Ilchester.

The unpleasant thought divided Castiel’s attention as he tongued Deanna’s gorgeous ass. For that, if nothing else, he resented the damn city of mages and everything it represented. Deanna was perfection in bed, supple and sweet yet demanding, caring and tender yet aggressive, and Castiel wanted to bask in every noise she made, feel himself grow painfully aroused as he waited and waited until she was satisfied and then asked for what he wanted for himself. They were running short on time, and if Castiel was going to get his cock in her, it had to be soon.

He hadn’t asked her about that yet.

He wondered if she understood enough about how sex worked to know that having him fill her was an option. He wondered how much her father had actually taught her.

That unpleasant thought brought him up short again. Deanna made the most delicious noises, hitched her hips against his cheeks as he licked around her rim, stretched her hole with his tongue, but he paid only half a mind to his task, unable to put aside his concerns. The only reason Deanna allowed his touch was because of her father’s training. It was wrong of Castiel to take advantage of her, wrong of him to keep the truth from her.

Since when did he care about wrong and right?

Moving to Lawrence had softened him. That must be it. Their righteousness and kind-heartedness had seeped into him, turned him into someone who cared. Caring was dangerous. Caring got people killed. Castiel had seen it happen time and time again. He wouldn’t fall prey to the same foolishness that had led Anna and Balthazar to their ugly ends.

What happened to them wasn’t my fault.

“—re, more, more…” The Princess panted desperately, pressing back against his face, and Castiel startled back into the moment, wondering how long she’d been begging. No matter. Teasing did a lovely young woman good. “…more, more, please more…” Every breathy sound was delicious, helped focus Castiel, helped him push aside his other worries. None of those issues were his concern. Deanna’s complex, unfair situation had nothing to do with him. Ignoring her pleas, he continued to tongue her, continued to revel in her musky flavor, until her words dissolved into incomprehensible pleading whimpers. Only then did he take up the toy that the King had sent with the Princess. Deanna had not been able to use the dildo effectively – hadn’t even known that was what it was called, poor innocent dupe, the King had done a consummate job of keeping her naïve – and Castiel
intended to demonstrate to her how it was used. Withdrawing his tongue earned him a distressed cry, Deanna so gone that she shook. Castiel shifted from her and blew cold air over her exposed hole. With another cry, Deanna slumped against the bed, shoving her ass towards him desperately.

*Gods, forget using the toy, I could pull my cock out, mount her, fuck her senseless for the next week. Right now she’d let me. Right now she’d beg for it.*

No. She’s been taken advantage of too many times already.

She knew he intended to use the toy, had said it was alright with her that he do so. She’d granted him permission to use his tongue, as well, though she’d obviously been distressed by how dirty she perceived her own lovely asshole as being. That saddened him, and made him wonder what her father had said to her over the years that had her convinced that being pleasured, even in the same place from which she defecated, was in any way filthy.

And dammit, he was getting distracted again.

“Sir Knight!”

“Say my name,” he growled.

“Castiel, please, please, I can’t…I need…!”

“I know what you need.” Castiel ground the words against the sensitive skin of her ass cheek, took up the toy, and in one swift, steady motion, plunged it deep into her body.

Deanna’s back arched, thrusting her ass even harder against the toy, and she screamed as it stretched her, filled her, pleased her. Castiel left it for a moment, used a hand around Deanna’s crotch to adjust the angle of her hips, tentatively fondled her balls through the cage binding her, leaned in and tongued her rim again. Beyond words, she tried to express her need but only managed choked off sobs. Seizing the base of the toy, Castiel pulled it out slowly, pushed it in slowly, ran his tongue along her rim, stretched her slightly more than the toy was able to. Attentive to every sound she made, Castiel thrust in and out, modifying his speed and angle until she burst out a strangled gasp and Castiel knew that he’d found an angle that hit her most sensitive places. Exploring, he ran the toy over her again gently, and again, and when he’d confirmed that he knew exactly how best to drive her wild, he paused.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Her rim fluttered around the bulk stretching her. Her throat leaked constant moans with every breath. Her back rapidly rose and fell, forced up by her panting. Her hips rolled, desperate for friction, desperate for touch. Sweat beaded along her spine, matted tendrils of hair about her neck.

“You are truly are the most beautiful creature,” he murmured against her skin.

“Cas—”

Interrupting her, Castiel jerked the toy out until only the tip still filled her and then jammed it hard into her body. She choked on her words, started to say something else, but Castiel did it again and she broke off with a guttural, spectacular groan. More turned on than he could believe, Castiel rutted his hips at air, desperate for touch to his cock, matching the rough, rapid tempo he used to fuck her
with the dildo.

There were no fireworks when she came, no screams, no pleas. One moment she was riding up into the toy cock as hard as he was pushing it down into her, and the next she went limp against bed, listing to one side. The toy nearly pulled out of her as she slid over but Castiel adjusted and continued to fill her roughly, pushing her through her climax. She shuddered and twitched and whimpered, fingers fumbling for the blankets. Lying now on her side, Castiel could see her small, trapped cock leaking pearls of come. Slowing his tempo but still thrusting within her, Castiel leaned down and licked between the bars of the cage, lapping up the precious, bitter fluid, tasting her dick for the first time. She gasped.

“What are you…” She trailed off, hips straining back against the toy, forward towards his mouth.

“I can stop if you don’t like it,” Castiel breathed hot against her dick. He didn’t want to stop, even though the bars of her cage dug into his cheek and scraped his lip.

“No,” she breathed. “It’s…strange…different…but…” He flicked out again, his tongue barely long enough to catch her slit, and she moaned. “Feels so good.” Castiel looked up at her, met her eyes as she stared down at him, an abstract, dopey smile broad on her lovely face. “I feel so good right now.”

I don’t want to give her up. I don’t want to see her made a woman. I want to keep her – those noises, those words, that expression – all for myself.

“I’m glad,” was all he managed to say in reply. Finally, finally, he ceased to rub her with the toy, leaving it deep in her body. She sighed, replete, content, and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Leave it there,” she murmured happily. “I like the way it feels.”

I want her to say that about my dick. I want to be the reason she makes those pleased sounds. I want to fall asleep encompassed by her, hot and wet, slick with my come as I soften in her ass.

For long moments, Castiel wrestled with his inner demons as his cock throbbed and gradually softened. The Princess hummed idly, apparently unaware that she was doing so, and ruffled his hair. Then she sighed, and instead of happiness, Castiel caught the distinct sound of resignation, displeasure, and sadness.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

No. Don’t ask. It doesn’t matter. It’s not my place to fix it.

“Do I bore you, Castiel?” she asked, words incongruous with the languid way she massaged his scalp. “I know I’m inexperienced, that what we are doing together is inappropriate. Papa was very clear: none but he and my husband could ever be trusted to touch me like this.”

“I wish you wouldn’t speak of your father to me,” Castiel interrupted, anger boiling beneath his skin. Perhaps, when she is safe with her new husband in Vermilion, I will return to Lawrence and instruct his Royal Majesty on exactly how deeply inappropriate his actions have been.

No. It doesn’t matter. It’s not my place to interfere. I cannot afford yet another enemy. I cannot risk losing my last bastion. If Roman or Crowley’s men find me I will beg for death long before the end, just like Anna begged.

Just like Gabriel begged.
Deanna continued as if he’d not interjected. “But I made this choice – I asked for your help – and I know that helping me arouses you. That’s understandable – you’re a man, and I’m a woman, and attraction is natural and normal. But I…I like that your penis grows hard because of me, because of my actions. I want to pleasure you in return, but you scarce tell me how I might do so.”

“It’s not my place…” Castiel trailed off, unable to bring himself to complete the lie. He craved her touch – her fingers, her mouth, her ass – on his cock.

None of this is my place. I should never have been in this position in the first place.

But I am.

Maybe it is my place.

“I’d like to put my…penis…in your mouth,” said Castiel flatly. The fingers toying with his hair froze, stiff, and Deanna gasped, startled. “Similar to how I licked your…vagina…after you were…drained…”

I want you to suck my cock, Princess, just like I licked yours. I want you to taste my come, as I tasted yours. I am sick of tiptoeing around this, tired of lying to you. The King has made me an accomplice to his disgusting crimes and I hate him for it. I hate him for what he did to you. Not because you’re unhappy, but because you are so sheltered that you don’t even understand that you might have cause to be unhappy.

When you find out, which you inevitably will, I think you will be unhappy.

And I never want to see you unhappy.

What in the five hells is going to happen to you in Ilchester? Has the Inquisitor been prepped on what lies to tell you, to convince you that your fate there is normal? What lies did the King ply you with ahead of time? What nonsense do you believe, what ridiculous bullshit are you so convinced is true that you take it for granted and don’t even mention it?

Would I correct you even if you did?

Castiel blinked.

Deanna was staring at him, mouth parted slightly around quickening breaths.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” he said. “I shouldn’t have asked. I—”

“Do it,” she said in a rush.

“You don’t have to—”

“I know,” she cut him off. “I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do. I want to pleasure you, Castiel. I want…I want to be a woman that you find pleasing.”

“Why?” The question burst from Castiel’s lips before he could stop himself.

“Because you don’t treat me like I’m nothing,” she replied. “Because you don’t coddle me or cushion me or prevent me from experiencing things. Because you tell me the truth instead of pretty lies that you think I’ll be pleased to hear. Because despite your harsh words your actions are always gentle and give lie to the heartlessness you try to project.”

“You don’t know me,” he said with unnecessary harshness.
“Because you won’t let me know you,” she agreed, uncowed, unafraid, meeting his eyes. You’re incredible. “But I would like to."

“In a week, we’ll be in Ilchester,” said Castiel, as much to remind himself as to remind her. “In three weeks, if not sooner, will be in Vermilion.”

“And as you are so fond of pointing out, I can expect my husband to accommodate of my desires,” she countered. “If I request that you stay with me, a familiar retainer from home, I can’t imagine he’ll deny my wish.”

I would like that.

The thought sprung up instantly, unbidden, and Castiel grimaced. “That is an optimistic reading of the situation,” he said quellingly, “and it assumes that he won’t realize that we have been intimate. Further, it assumes that I would want to say.”

“Are you claiming that you wouldn’t want to stay?” she challenged him.

I want to stay with you.

“Why would I want that?” Castiel scoffed.

“I don’t believe you,” Deanna said simply.

“Princess—”

“Say my name, Sir Knight,” she replied.

“Your Highness—”

“Castiel, say my name.” Regal, beautiful, strong even naked, her words were a ringing command and Castiel was powerless to resist.

“Deanna,” he murmured, unable to keep a hint of reverence from his voice. “I’m not sure what fantasy you’ve constructed about me but I’ve tried again and again to tell you, I am not the man you think I am.”

“Nonsense.” She dismissed his worries with a flick of her delicate hand and a roll of her beautiful eyes and damn if everything she did wasn’t gorgeous in his eyes. Castiel thought he still had some resistance left, but he was wrong. Her charms had completely won him over. “I know you are dedicated, loyal, and hard-working. I know you are well-traveled, educated, and worldly. I know that you are a killer, a trained fighter, and a woodsman. I know that you are not from Lawrence, that you sought protection there from a past that pursued you, and that despite that, of all his servants, my father chose you to accompany me.” How does she know that I sought protection? “I know that I feel hot and good when I am with you, as I never have with anyone else.” Snapping an arm out, she wrapped her fingers around his half-hard cock and stroked. “I know that you want me. And I know that you will never, ever lie to me.” She stroked again, again, coaxing him to full hardness as Castiel watched her, amazed, too stunned to contradict her, though he’d lied to her repeatedly already and fully intended to continue doing so. “What else, exactly, do you believe I need to know about you? What do you think you know about me, that leads you to think that any of this would be unacceptable to me?”

“I will not be acceptable to Prince Michael,” Castiel managed in strangled tones. He could swear he could hear the blood rushing to his cock as a thrumming noise in his ears. Her touch was sinful, for all that it was still clumsy and inexperienced.
“I…” Stroke. “…do…” Stroke. “…not…” Stroke. “…care…”

“Princess—”

Stroke. “Name!” Stroke.

“Deanna!”

Castiel had massively under-estimated her.

He’d never wanted anyone so much in his life.

Deanna surged across the bed, wrapped her plump pink lips around the head of his cock, and sucked hard. Beyond shocked, Castiel stared down at her and watched her eyes go wide, felt her tongue tentatively lap at the pre-come beading out of him, gasped as her stroking hand rubbed the base of his cock, slowly traced a line along his inner thigh, and then hesitantly wrapped around his balls. Her lips puckered as she took in his cockhead, pushing back his foreskin, and her fingers kneaded Castiel’s balls, and that was it.

He was done.

With a deep groan, Castiel spilled into Deanna’s mouth. Castiel hadn’t come so mortifyingly quickly since he was a teenager and Crowley thought it’d be amusing to put his young protégé’s sexuality on display for all to see. The Princess coughed, stunned, semen running down her chin and splattering Castiel’s belly as she pulled away. Growling, Castiel grabbed the back of her head and jammed his cock back into her mouth as she spluttered, spurting a second load onto her tongue. Sultry air enveloped him, every stuttering breath and sucking cough felt like Castiel was ascending to a new level of heaven, and pleasure wracked him. She tried to pull away but Castiel stiffened his grip and she went limp. She even managed to swallow some of his release.

If Castiel could have, he’d have come again watching the bob and dip of her throat as she tried to take his seed into her.

Spent, Castiel let his arm drop, but Deanna didn’t move away as he’d expected she would. Instead, she placed kittenish licks along his softening length, a curious expression on her face as she sampled his flavor and swallowed more and more of his bitter come. Castiel could only watch her in bemused arousal. Delicate kisses were given to his balls, his length, his thighs, and finally to his cockhead, and with a sigh Castiel’s shoulders slumped in bliss and a fresh dribble of come leaked out of him. Head quirked to one side, Deanna stared at it, then experimentally kissed the tip and sucked hard.

“I’m good,” Castiel croaked desperately, twitching under the continued stimulation. “I’m done, Prin…Deanna.”

“You liked it?” The contrast between her innocent, shy smile, her hoarsened voice, and the come coating her chin, a single drop dangling but not quite falling, was sinful and utterly captivating. Reaching down, Castiel cupped his hand around her chin, used his thumb to wipe away the bead of come, tilted her head up, leaned down and kissed the salty, unpleasant flavor of himself from her mouth. She made a startled, pleased noise and reciprocated the kiss.

“Very much,” agreed Castiel, brushing her lips with every word. He started to stand up straight again but she chased his mouth, rising up on her knees, and Castiel granted her desire and reciprocated with all the passion he was finally allowing himself to feel.

*Why have I been fighting this so hard?*
How about because it's going to get me killed? She's going to get me killed!

I'm not sure life is worth living without her anyway.

Seriously?

Holy Gods in Hell, I'm doomed.

“I'm glad I pleased you,” the Princess said huskily.

I'm not.

“You're a treasure,” murmured Castiel. “You deserve…”

…you deserve the truth…

“Hush,” she interrupted him, putting a finger over his lips. Castiel could taste himself on her hand. Astonishingly, his cock gave a twitch as if to thicken again. He was nearly two score, far too old to recover so quickly, but he wanted to. Gods, he wanted to, he wanted to flip her on to her back and jam himself into her, fuck her until she sobbed with pleasure, until her small trapped cock wept pre-come, until she shook apart again and again. “I will not be free for long. Let's enjoy it while we can, and not dwell on what's to come.”

If I were less of a coward, I would smash the cage that traps you.

“As you wish, your Highness.”

Chapter End Notes

Next update on Sunday, January 22nd, 2017
“Tell me about Ilchester,” Deanna suggested as the day’s ride dragged on indefinitely. The weather was the worst it had been throughout their journey. A steady downpour soaked them to the skin and drenched their horses. Deanna’s normally flowing garments hung limp and sodden, water seeped into the joints of Castiel’s armor and caused an obnoxious squeak every time he moved, and the wet leather of their saddles and reins suffused the air around their mounts with an unpleasant smell. The horses plodded miserably, heads drooping, manes plastered to their necks, their clopping steps kicking up mud that coated their legs and the humans’ legs both.

“Euphemistically, it’s the City of Mages,” Castiel explained. “That’s a misnomer, though. Even totaling all the Mages who work and live at the Ilchester Academy and those who’ve decided to stay post-graduation and make a life there, Mages still are a minority of the residents. Mostly, it’s a city, like any other, though with a higher proportion of spell-weavers than most places in the world. Further, due to their power and wealth, mages control the government, the guilds, and the majority of the trade. Ilchester is known for high quality-enchanted goods, unsurprisingly, especially textiles and leathers – one entire gate is surrounded by tanners, downwind, of course. They’ve also got a bit of a reputation for wine – these hills are good for growing grapes.”

“How do you know so much about the world?”

“Not by choice.” Without making a conscious decision, Castiel found the truth pouring from him. “I wasn’t born in Bootbock but I was sold to an owner there when I was young—”

“Oh!” she interjected, eyes wide with sympathy.

“—and I thought to spend my life there. It suited me, or perhaps I suited it. Either way, I was relatively happy there,” confessed Castiel. <i>Gotten damn good at lying to yourself, Castiel…tell her relatively happy you were when Gabriel died. “However…disagreements…with my employers forced me to leave, and I spent several years surviving on my own.” She doesn’t need to know this. “I learned everything I could about the world in search of a place of safety, lived in the wild for a time, almost starved to death, and ultimately settled in Lawrence when the King promised me sanctuary.” I never tell anyone about myself. It’s no one’s damn business.</i>

But she asked.

And I want her to know.

“My father is such a good man.” The worshipful note in Deanna’s voice nauseated Castiel.

<i>Tell her the truth. </i>

<i>Tell her the truth. </i>

<i>Tell her the truth. </i>

No.

<i>Tell her the—</i>
“Have you been to Ilchester before?” There was something timid to the question, and in the gaze that Deanna directed Castiel’s way. Grimacing, he realized his eyes were narrowed angrily, his teeth clenched, his hands gripped in tight fists balled around the rain-slickened leather reins. An unusually large drop of water splashed onto his face from the branches under which they road, and Castiel shook his dark expression away and tried to look reassuring instead. “If you don’t want to talk…”

“Ask anything you’d like,” Castiel said with a semblance of grace. “I haven’t been to Ilchester. It would not have been a safe place for me.”

“Why not?” she asked, quirking her head to one side.

_You should have been a Prince. You should have been trained in statecraft. Heck, even as a Princess you should know these things. You should be prepared to help your husband govern when he is King. You could be a glorious King or Queen. Instead, your father kept you ignorant, kept you naïve, kept you pliant, kept you his._

_Tell her the truth!_

_Never! It’s not my place! It’s none of my business!_

“Ilchester and Bootbock have an alliance of sorts.”

“But you told me that Bootbock is across the ocean!” she said.

_You should know so much more. You are brilliant and insightful, but untrained. Or at least, untrained in the ways that matter. You’re perfectly trained as a sex toy._

“The Mages can use portals to transport goods and people, if the price is right,” explained Castiel patiently. “The Bootbock slave traders pay handsomely to ensure that their cargo is moved quickly and safely. Both my former employers from Bootbock have close ties to—”

King John Winchester wants to eliminate me.

A series of disparate pieces of information suddenly crashed into place, a complete, damning puzzle solved instantly in his head.

_No, that doesn’t make any sense. He expects me to escort the Princess to Vermilion._

_Unless there is a different entourage awaiting to escort her after the Inquisitor does his dirty deed. There will be no more need to make a secret of the Princess’ gender when Alastair is done with her._

_Think it through, Castiel. Think it through. This is too important to get wrong._

_“Sir Knight?”_

_Inquisitor Alastair is in Ilchester. King John somehow learns of his existence – if he truly is secretly a fleshcrafter, which seems the likeliest explanation for this detour – contacts him and makes arrangements to have his son modified so that Deanna’s biological gender will match her training and beliefs and mental gender. He sends her to her appointment with the Mage with only me. It would be an insult to the royalty of Vermilion for the Princess to arrive with so small an entourage. Why has the King protected me all these years? What was in it for him? Why antagonize two powerful, well-connected, wealthy men to protect one lowly Knight, however competent the Knight?_
“Sir Knight??”

I always dismissed those concerns. Lawrence is so good, the people are so pure, the King and his family always portrayed such idealism and uprightness and propriety that I thought they helped me because it was the right thing to do, or some such nonsense.

After a lifetime of being treated as a tool, I should have known better.

“Sir Knight!”

Now I know what King John is really like. Now I do know better.

Could he really be this smart? Could he really be playing this long a game? Could he really have brought me on knowing that this day was coming? I’ve been in his service since Deanna was 8 years old.

“Castiel!”

Crowley plays the game that long.

Roman plays the game that long.

Deanna already was being sold to the public of Lawrence as a woman when she was 8.

Was she already—

Was King John already—

“When did you start wearing your cage?” Castiel asked, soft voice a violent contrast to his shrieking, racing thoughts.

“That’s not—” Deanna huffed a breath. “I mean…are you alright? No, I…why…? What’s going on, Castiel?”

I think your father plans to have me killed in Ilchester.

“I’m not sure,” said Castiel. It wasn’t exactly a lie. He wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure that King John planned to have Deanna made into a woman. He wasn’t sure why the King chose Castiel. He wasn’t sure about anything.

But he was getting more sure by the minute.

“My mother died when I was 4,” Deanna explained, voice unreadable. Concerned, Castiel looked up. With the rain pelting her face, slicking her hair to her scalp, streaming down her cheeks, the only way that Castiel could tell she was crying was by the redness of her eyes.

I love how readily she expresses her emotions.

“I was devastated,” she continued, gaze fixed on her hands as they rested on the pommel of her saddle. The horses plodded on regardless of their commands, following the road, so there was no need for a firm hand on the reins. “Sammy was only a baby. I wasn’t even able to talk for weeks, I was so upset, and Papa was grieving and still had to be King. He came to me and said that I had to be a big, strong girl for Sam.”

No. No, he didn’t. Even King John wouldn’t have—
“Mama was dead, and though we’d have nurse maids and tutors, none of them would be a mother.” Deanna was, mercifully or not, oblivious to Castiel’s thoughts. “Didn’t Sam deserve a mother? Of course he did. I remember thinking that I deserved a mother, too. I thought…but of course Papa was right. Papa is always right.” Strangely, it was the most anti-King John thing Castiel had ever heard the Princess say, bitter and resentful. “So he told me I’d have to act very grown up and mature, that I’d have to be Mama now that she was gone. He gave me my first chastity device not long afterwards.”

King John

“He said it was what big girls wore, and that I had to be a big, strong girl.”

Started

“He put it on me himself.”

Molesting

“His hands were so warm and big and gentle…”

Deanna

“…he’s the only one with the key, and the only one who has ever taken it off, and then only when I had grown enough that I needed a bigger one.”

When

She sighed and wiped her eyes, though her forehead and cheeks immediately grew damp again as the rain continued to fall.

She

“I suppose soon I won’t wear it anymore.”

Was

“That will be so strange…”

Four.

I have to tell her.

How?

“Of course.” The need to sound unaffected, to sound like he wasn’t horrified, made his voice as flat and cold and dreary as the day through which they rode. Even in Bootbock such a crime was unheard of. Children raised there weren’t innocent but they were not considered an appropriate target for sexual violence. Castiel had been beaten, abused, molded, and trained and turned into a creature he hardly recognized as the innocent boy he’d managed to stay thanks to his brother’s protection, but no one had touched his cock or his ass until he was older. Once a child hit puberty they were fair game for any pervert who wanted a good time, but younger than that? Even in Bootbock touching a young child in a sexual manner was taboo.

And John Winchester has groomed Deanna since she was too young to know the proper name for her genitals.
Tell.

Her.

The.

Truth.

But the words wouldn’t come.

“What’s going on…Castiel?” The hesitation with which she said his name was like a knife to the chest – something that Castiel had experienced, a feeling he remembered too well. She wasn’t sure what to call him, wasn’t sure what their relationship was, because Castiel was an ass who had tried to use her for his own desires as surely as her father had tried to use her for his own desires.

“I only seduced you to see if I could,” he said flatly.

Great. That you can say, but you can’t tell her what her father’s done to her? No, of course not, and you only told her you intentionally seduced her to push her away. Once a coward, always a coward, and—

“Oh.” She grimaced and turned away from him, surveying the landscape around them that surely only appeared bleak because Castiel was frustrated and uneasy and the weather was so bad. “I’m sorry I troubled you with so much personal information about myself.” There was a long pause, during which Castiel repressed the urge to say that he hadn’t minded, and then she asked, “Why tell me that now?”

“Because I’m an asshole, and a coward,” said Castiel.

It was the truest thing he’d ever said to her. Admitting it was the least he could do, since he couldn’t bring himself to shatter her life by telling her the truth about herself and her father.

Maybe it was kinder to let her continue to live the lie, until the Inquisitor made it truth.

Lying to yourself again, Castiel. Great job.

She deserved to know the truth. She deserved to make a choice. She deserved a companion who was ten times the man that Castiel was.

Unfortunately, Castiel was who she had.

And he said nothing.

And Deanna said nothing.

Yet that night, she slipped into his bed, came with his fingers inside her and his name on her lips, stroked him to climax, and slept in his arms.

And for the first time since he reached adulthood, Castiel *wanted* to be a better man than he was.

*Before I risk everything, I have to be sure.*

“Excuse me, I’m looking for the services of an Inquisitor,” Castiel asked the woman sitting, bored and disinterested, at the reception desk of the lavish front hall of the school for Mages. A magical three dimensional sign showed a small wizard holding his hand outstretched as a sequence of
illusions spawned over his palm, repeated infinitely. The slogan “Learn the Arts at Ilchester Academy of Wizardry!” bounced beneath him, with smaller text below promising low tuition, good instructors, and great job prospects.

“We do referrals,” she said, reaching beneath her desk. She drew out an enormous tome and laboriously slammed it down on the desk before her. “What kind of services are you looking for?”

“Well, as to that…a friend referred me to Inquisitor Alastair…?”

Her disinterested expression went instantly flat and cold. “You, your friend, and Inquisitor Alastair can take a nice journey together through the five hells.”

“…maybe I should try someone else, then?” he posited hesitantly.

Lifting her book once more, she put it away and stared through him.

“Could you tell me where his offices are?”

She ignored him.

“Didn’t he graduate from here?”

She ignored him.

“I thought perhaps he was a fleshcrafter…?”

She reached into a drawer, pulled out a sign that said “Out to Lunch,” placed it on her desk, rose and left.

“I’ll just come back some other time!”

She ignored him.

Interesting but inconclusive…

What if I’ve misjudged everything? What if John really wouldn’t try to remake his daughter?

“There you go, all fixed up!” said the grinning man, holding a mirror up so, by twisting around, Castiel could see his back. The skin was smooth, unblemished, the scar from the time that one of Crowley’s men had ambushed him and stabbed him gone. It was a small, insignificant, purely cosmetic form of fleshcraft, and one of the only forms that was legal.

“Thank you. It looks great,” Castiel said, counting out most of their remaining money. “I was wondering…I’m looking for someone to do work a little more advanced than this. Gender reversal. I mean, women seem to enjoy sex, I thought I’d give it a try, ya know? Might you be someone who could do that? Just temporarily, you understand…”

“No,” said the Mage tersely, smile falling away.

“Maybe one of your colleagues?” Castiel pushed.

“Absolutely not,” the Mage reiterated. “It’s illegal.”

“Aw, come on, doesn’t anybody bend the rules even a little?” Castiel gave him a knowing smile but got a firm, cold look in return.
“Not if they want to stay out of prison. It’s a Class 5 Felony.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Guess it depends how much you like being alive,” snapped the Mage. “Personally, I’m very fond of it.”

“The penalty is death?” asked Castiel incredulously. The Mage nodded. “Huh. I must have heard wrong then. Before I got here, someone told me that a mage named Alastair sometimes did—”

“Goodbye.” The Mage slammed his hat on his head, snatched the money from Castiel’s hand, and turned away.

“But—”

“Goodbye.”

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How am I supposed to learn anything when no one will talk?

“I’m looking for someone,” said Castiel, sidling onto a low bench beside a beautiful, painted young man. Alert, Castiel kept his back to the wall, his eyes on the door. The seedy tavern in Ilchester’s pleasure district was exactly the kind of place where ill luck could get him killed by one of Crowley or Roman’s agents.

“Sugar, you found someone,” said the boy, smiling beatifically. “Though with eyes like yours, I’m shocked you had trouble. If I had those baby blues, I wouldn’t have to work in this dump.”

“Tough times, tough times,” Castiel commiserated. The whore nodded. “But sadly, companionship is not what I had in mind.” A moue of disappointment twisted the boy’s lovely face and Castiel felt a strange twinge in his chest. Normally, the young man would have been exactly his type – lithe, lean, long-limbed, slim-fingered, full-lipped – but as Castiel imagined paying his money and taking the boy to a room, running his fingers over delicate, pale skin ridged by hard ribs, it was Deanna’s chest he touched, Deanna’s caged cock he grasped for, Deanna’s ass he craved, Deanna’s lips he kissed, and Deanna’s eyes he drowned in.

I am so screwed.

Not in the fun way.

I have to find out the truth of this. And I should…I have to…protect her.

I think.

Maybe.

“You need to relax, hun” the whore suggested, ghosting his hand up Castiel’s leg. It was all Castiel could do not to shudder and shove the touch aside. It was too confident, too strong, too wrong.

It wasn’t Deanna’s.

“I can relax when I’m dead,” replied Castiel harshly, stingingly. The boy picked up on Castiel’s anger and withdrew his hand. He shifted from Castiel, wary of danger, and crossed his arms defensively across his chest.

“Fine,” he pouted. “What do you want?”
“An Inquisitor,” said Castiel.

“You have come to the wrong place, sweetie,” said the whore.

“I don’t think so,” Castiel shook his head. “Several different people suggested this was the perfect place to find who I’m looking for. His name is Alastair.”

Castiel was watching carefully, so he caught every expression that flickered over the boy’s face. Shock came first, followed immediately by terror. His skin went pale beneath his caked-on makeup. As quickly as his façade broke, though, he resumed it, eyes narrowed suspiciously, lips pursed with disdain, as if what Castiel said hadn’t affected him. His hands shook. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“I’ve got nothing to do with him,” the whore sniffed, but he couldn’t keep the quaver from his voice.

“I didn’t think you did,” said Castiel soothingly. “To tell you the truth I’ve heard the name but I know little about him. At the moment I’m looking for information.” Castiel sweetened the pot by sliding the last of his bribe money to the boy.

“Some people want…weird stuff,” the boy said, snatching the money. “In their partners, I mean. Extra limbs, or missing limbs. Hermaphrodites. Tentacles. Boys with breasts. They’ll pay good money to the whore willing to sacrifice themselves – modify themselves. When one of us gets desperate enough to consider catering to those…special interests…we all know who we can go to if we want the changes made to our bodies. Except, sometimes the boys and girls who go to him don’t come back. That’s Alastair.”

“What would I find him?”

“I don’t know,” said the whore. “And I don’t want to know. But I know who does.”

This is worse than I imagined. Not much worse. I have a damn active imagination. But worse.

“If you hurt her, we’ll kill you,” said the pimp who’d shown Castiel to the room matter-of-factly.

The brothel had appeared ordinary from the outside, and sounded ordinary as Castiel made his way up the first two flights of stairs. The air was filled with moans and thuds, but on the third floor they were muted. The hallway up here was plain and uncarpeted, the rooms small and bare when he could see them through open doors. This one was comfortable, though not luxurious. A simple frame bed supported a straw mattress. A chest held clothing and was topped by the meaningless detritus of knickknacks that even the poorest people seemed to gather over the course of a lifetime. A simple woven carpet added a splash of color to the floor, no less welcome for being worn through in a couple places. And a young woman sat curled up on the bed, her one eye staring at nothing. The other half of her face was…Castiel lacked the words to describe it. There was no eye. More than that – there was no place where an eye could ever have been, smooth, puckered skin without a blemish. While her nose was intact, her cheek was concave, her lips sagged, and her ear looked like it had been melted. The blankets wrapped around her like armor couldn’t hide that there was something wrong with the shape of the body beneath, though Castiel couldn’t tell what. He didn’t want to know.

The door closed with a jarring clatter. The woman blinked at Castiel, slowly, deliberately, and half her mouth quirked into a smile while the other half remained slack. Pristine white teeth showed incongruously between parted lips, and a bead of spittle dripped from the limp corner. Strands of dark hair fell across her face and made her skin seem even more inhumanly pale by contrast.

“Like what you see?” she asked, words slurred, voice reedy.
“It’s a fine example of Alastair’s work,” he replied, unsure how to play the situation. The pimp had told him nothing when Castiel had asked to speak with “Ruby,” only led him up the stairs and issued his dire warning at the end.

“I know,” she purred. Rising, the blanket fell away and revealed her body – scarred, torn, disfigured, naked. Stomach turning, Castiel forced himself to keep his gaze on the wreck of her face. “I’m beautiful.”

“Yes,” he said, throat dry. She sidled up to him, left leg scarce able to support her weight, giving her a rolling gait as if she might collapse at any moment. “Is this what you asked for?”

“No exactly,” she admitted, pressing her mouth to his chin. “But Alastair...convinced me.” Her mouth couldn’t actually be cold on the slack side. It must be Castiel’s imagination.

This could be Deanna.

“He can be very…persuasive…” Her voice grew stronger, more luscious, the longer she spoke. One of her hands slid down his front and fondled at his limp cock and slack balls and Castiel fought not to throw up. “…so can I,” she whispered in his ear. “I can teach you to want me, just like Alastair taught me to want him.”

Is this what he’ll do to my Princess? Is this what King John hired Alastair to do to his daughter?

No. He needs Deanna to be valuable. For whatever reason, he needs the alliance with Vermilion, needs it badly enough that he would sacrifice his custom-groomed sex toy to the whims of Prince Michael. But he can’t trade them a boy when they expect a Princess. That’s where Alastair comes in.

But that doesn’t mean Alastair won’t hurt her first. That doesn’t mean Alastair won’t break her, physically and mentally. He’s a fleshcrafter, he could carve into her a thousand times and repair it every time, carve into her until she begged for his knife, play with her until she’ll concede to anything he asks, no matter how depraved. This woman…Ruby…she is broken, and Alastair kept at her so long that he convinced her that this was what she wanted. Maybe that’s what Ruby has to believe, in order to function.

I can’t even imagine that being done to Deanna. Conceiving of it hurts too much.

I have to talk to her.

I have to protect the Princess.

Ruby’s hand fumbled at the buttons of Castiel’s breeches and something in him snapped so thoroughly he was shocked the sound wasn’t audible throughout the building. Firmly, he grabbed her hand and disentangled from her.

“Thank you for your time,” he said, urging her towards the bed.

“Soldier, you can have as much of my time as you want,” she said, leering.

“Please, take care of yourself.”

“I’d rather you take care of me!”

She hurled herself at him but Castiel turned, let her climb on his back, carried her with him to the door. It was locked. Of course it was locked. He knocked and hoped there was someone in the hall
to hear. Fortunately, a moment later it opened and the pimp stood out there, weapon in hand. When he saw the situation he sighed and sheathed his knife.

“Ruby,” he said gently, “that’s enough.”

“We agreed,” she hissed. “You never let me do my job anymore!”

“You did enough,” the pimp said. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of you.”

“I’m not worried, I’m horny,” she snapped. Her nails dug possessively into Castiel’s shoulder and he looked a plea at the brothel worker. Understanding, the man came and gently disentangled her. It was depressingly easy; the destroyed part of her body had no strength, and her other side wasn’t powerful enough to compensate.

“We’ll take care of you,” the pimp repeated.

“Please?” she whispered plaintively. Her fingers snagged desperately at the fabric of Castiel’s shirt and he shuddered. “I’m beautiful now, right? I did good, right?”

“You did wonderfully,” Castiel lied. “And yes, you’re beautiful.”

The pimp looked at him approvingly. Ruby’s hand fell away and with a sigh like wind through a bleak winter forest, she dragged herself back to her bed. Rustles and brushes spoke to her re-arming herself in her blanket, but Castiel couldn’t bring himself to look at the ruin of her face again.

*That could be my Princess. That could be my Deanna.*

*I have been a coward. I have been weak. I have been selfish. But I will never let that happen to her. I must speak with her.*

“I knew you wanted me,” she said contentedly. “I knew *everyone* would want me.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter posts on Sunday, January 29th, 2017
Chapter 6

Deanna, there’s something we need to talk about.

Striding down the streets of Ilchester, gusts of wind tugging at his hair, Castiel considered what he’d say to the Princess when he got back to the inn.

Look, I’m sorry I’ve been such an ass but—

No, that’ll never work.

The streets bustled with hawkers, merchants, and workers. Lacquered carriages made their ungainly way down the cobblestones, riders jostled by every rock, ostlers cracking their whips not to get the horses moving, but to get the pedestrians out of their way.

Your Highness, I’ve decided that my sense of what’s right outweighs my duty to your father and—

Don’t kid yourself, Castiel, she knows you well enough to know you don’t give a damn about what’s ‘right.’

Castiel casually dodged around a whip crack and caught a glimpse of an enameled coat of arms.

Babe, you’re a man.

Hahaha…wait.

The sigil of a black dog, encircled by thorns pearled red with drops of blood, basked at the foot of a royal throne.

Crowley.

Choking on nothing, Castiel’s instincts kicked into fight or flee mode; his hand jerked to his sword, his heart clenched, and his feet started to run before he could process what a bad idea it was. He barely got three steps before he slammed into another passerby and they both tumbled to the ground. Castiel’s elbow struck stone with a jolt of blindingly intense pain, and someone kicked him in the side.

“By the deuce, what’s your problem?”

“Watch where you’re going!”

“You damn idiot!”

His sword was in hand and he was on his feet in an instant even as the person he’d barreled over grumbled and righted themselves, brushing dust and refuse from their clothes. Trying to look every way at once, he searched for who had kicked him, but pedestrians milled all about, most trying to go about their business and ignore the sword-wielding maniac. There was no obvious assailant. The crowd cleared a circle around him. The carriage rolled on. The only reason anyone paid him any mind was that he was making a scene. Forcing a deep breath, then another, Castiel sheathed his sword. He’d grown complacent, and now he was massively over-reacting. His fumbling was going to get him killed.

Why would Crowley leave Bootbock?
Why did King John send me with Deanna?

What’s really going on?

Weaving through the crowd, Castiel took a circuitous route back to the inn. Adrenalin coursed through him, heightened his senses, heightened his anxiety.

What does Alastair—

What will I say to her—

Did Crowley see—

Alert to every danger as he hadn’t been since he’d grown accustomed to the so-called lassitude of Lawrence, Castiel’s eyes darted toward every movement. What was the man leaning against the wall scowling at? What had the woman in the satin skirts just hidden up her sleeve? Every gesture, every gaze, every intrigue surrounding him suddenly carried covert intent. He knew nothing of the political, social, and economic currents of Ilchester. He didn’t know who the big players were, didn’t know who their agents were, didn’t know who was allied with whom, who was at war with whom, who could be trusted, who couldn’t be trusted. He didn’t know whose star was on the descent or who the bright up-and-comers were. Whatever was going on, Castiel and Deanna were surely tangled in it, and King John must know, and any one of the people around him might be involved in the scheming, or none of them might be, or all of them might be, and Castiel didn’t know. He had no information. He had no time. He had no one he could trust.

Deanna.

He had exactly one person he could trust.

There was no way he could tell her the truth, but he had to. Would she even believe him if he did? He trusted her – why shouldn’t he, he’d never met a creature less capable of being disingenuous in his life – but she had no cause to trust him. On the contrary, Castiel had deliberately given her cause not to trust him. Now he had a single conversation to try to undo the damage he’d done and convince her that they were in this together, to convince her that her beloved father had betrayed her from the time she was four years old.

What in all the realms was he supposed to say?

Castiel had circled a good chunk of the city by the time he returned to the inn. Not risking the front door, he went around to the stables and entered through the back. Tension thrummed beneath his skin, and as motivated as he was to speak to Deanna, his feet dragged. He still had no idea what he’d say, no idea how she’d react. When he finally reached her door, he stopped and stared at the ridged, lustrous wood for a full minute before he knocked.

There was no answer.

He knocked again.

There was still no answer.

A dozen, two dozen worst-case scenarios flashed through his head, but Castiel quashed them. It wasn’t late in day and Deanna was in a new city for the first time with no intimation of the danger she might be in because Castiel hadn’t told her. Instead he’d pushed her away, endangered her, again.
“Princess?” he asked loudly. Listening hard, he could hear the hubbub of the common room below, the crackle of fires burning in other rooms, the buzz of conversation that was ever-present in big cities, the rhythmic creak of the spit dog turning the spits in the kitchen, but there wasn’t a whisper of sound from in the Princess’ room. Frustrated, impatient, Castiel retreated to his own room to wait.

A heavy metal key unlocked the door and Castiel carefully opened it, on edge and prepared for trouble. Nothing awaited him inside the small room across the hall from Deanna’s, though. There was hardly space for him to walk around the narrow bed and washstand, and there was no place to store his belongings. His saddlebags made an awkward mound on the floor, belongings spilling out. Disappointed and frustrated, Castiel castigated himself for not taking the threats to Deanna and himself seriously. Desperate for a distraction, he repacked his things. They needed to be ready to leave at a moment’s notice.

No.

Castiel had to be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. What happened to Deanna wasn’t his problem. Who was he kidding? Castiel didn’t believe that any longer.

Nerves flaring, Castiel paced the narrow path beside his bed. The floorboards, worn to pale tan by thousands of feet doing the same before his, creaked and groaned beneath his weight. Danger could come at any moment, and Castiel fought the adrenaline surge that threatened to sicken him. The window to the room was small, but a determined attacker could slip through. The side of the building could be easily climbed. Perhaps he should nail the window down, or block it, or booby trap it. Deanna was out on the streets alone, likely exploring the city, taking in the sights, maybe shopping, blithely unaware that there might be danger. Castiel knew exactly how ruthless Crowley and Roman could be.

Would they hesitate to target her, if they believed doing so would draw Castiel out?

It didn’t seem likely; the two men knew exactly how little loyalty Castiel had to those who served. They were the reason he was so mistrusting and self-serving, after all. Nonetheless, he had to consider the possibility that they might target Deanna to attack Castiel indirectly. They’d gone after those they thought he cared about before.

But didn’t it depend on how King John set things up?

Surely he wouldn’t want Deanna hurt…unless her existence had become a liability, as Castiel’s had become a liability. No matter what arrangements the King had made with Ambassador Shurley and Queen Naomi and Prince Michael, the tragic death of the Princess might serve adequately to solidify the amity between Lawrence and Vermilion. The targets of their joint wrath would then be Crowley and Roman, and possibly all of Bootbock, considering the prominent position of the two men in the city. It was possible that they were being duped by King John, just as Castiel was. It was possible that King John truly was that much smarter and more nefarious than Castiel had imagined. Just consider what he’d done to his own daughter – his own son.

Or it was all conjecture. Crowley’s presence in Ilchester might be a coincidence; he had many business concerns that involved the mages of the city. Castiel might have been chosen to accompany Deanna because John didn’t think Castiel would give a damn about Alastair or Ilchester and would keep his mouth shut. The danger might be in Castiel’s head.

But what about what Alastair will do to Deanna? That is not in my head. I didn’t imagine what Alastair did to Ruby.
The only constant was that John Winchester was a royal asshole and Castiel wanted to see him suffer for what he’d done to his child. He had no other answers, only wild speculation that circled his head endlessly.

The view out Castiel’s window showed the sky glowing orange with sunset before he heard anyone walk by the hallway outside. Hoping it was Deanna, he strode to the door and pulled it open. The Princess started and glanced at him over her shoulder, long hair sweeping behind her, cloak taut across her shoulders. For an instant there was a smile on her lips and then she appeared to remember herself, remember what an ass he’d been to her, and her mouth compressed in a pale line, her eyes hard and disinterested.

*Thank the Gods above that you’re alright.*

*Did I really just think that?*

*Yes. Yes I did.*

Before he could speak, she had her door unlocked, opened, and she turned away.

“Princess, wait,” Castiel said. She froze, but didn’t turn back to him. “I was hoping we could speak.”

“Not right now,” she said tiredly. She hardly tried to feminize her voice, it was low and deep and masculine and incongruent with her well-tailored dress, and did things to Castiel that he did not want to think about. “Maybe later.”

“But—”

She stepped into her room and slammed the door shut, cutting him off. Two steps took Castiel to the entryway and he pounded the wood.

“Go away!”

“This is important – a matter of life and death – and—”

“And I know you don’t actually care,” she snapped. “I said go away and I meant it. If you have even an iota of the respect for me that you sometimes pretend to have you will respect my wishes and cease harassing me.”

Castiel raised his hand to pound on the wood again, then dropped it.

He had no one but himself to blame for her anger, her frustration, her intolerance of him. Making his disgruntled way down to the common room, Castiel slunk into an open seat on a bench at a long communal table, ordered a tankard that he had no idea how he’d pay for, and resolved that for at least a while, he’d try to think about anything other than how screwed he was.

It was full dark outside and the inn common room was crowded with day laborers drinking and eating noisily when Deanna made her way downstairs. Several man looked up, eyed her, and chose not to make jerks of themselves. This was a relatively classy establishment. Castiel wouldn’t risk the Princess’ safety by taking them to a dive, even given the dangers of their being observed and ambushed. At the base of the stairs, Deanna stopped, glanced around, and sashayed across the room to join him, gliding into an open seat on the bench opposite from him.

“Have you eaten?” she asked. Castiel shook his head. Raising an elegant hand, Deanna waved for one of the serving people. “We’d like two servings of whatever the kitchens have made for dinner.”
“Of course, lady,” said the serving man graciously, and went to get their meals. Deanna looked at Castiel, met his eyes, challenged him to say anything while they were surrounded by others, and Castiel held silent. What they needed to discuss could not be said in public. Moments later, the tension was broken by clunks as the server set a pewter plate before each of them, heaped with bread, stewed vegetables and pungent roasted meat.

“Utensils?” Deanna asked. The server fetched them as Deanna continued to stare Castiel down. They ate in silence.

Castiel supposed the food was good, but he could hardly taste it. She was angrier with him than he’d expected, angrier than her strange behavior the last few days could explain. Granted, he’d been cruel to her repeatedly, but she’d returned to his bed every night. He thought surely that had spoken to some fundamental understanding between them.

How naïve he’d been. How could there be a fundamental understanding between them when he verbally attacked her at every opportunity? How could she possibly trust him after how erratically he’d treated her? After he’d admitted that he had intentionally manipulating her?

Just like her father did. Learning the truth is going to break her. And I’m going to have to deal with the mess she becomes. Ugh. Maybe I should keep silent after all.

A memory came to him in vivid detail, Deanna standing and staring coldly at the bully that Castiel had just gutted.

Castiel was underestimating her again. She would be upset, but to assume she’d go to pieces was to treat her as a silly, vapid Princess instead of as the strong young woman – man? Person. Young person – that she was.

“I really do need to talk to you,” Castiel said as Deanna finished the last bite of her mutton and daintily used a rag to clean the juices from her chin. She gazed at him impassively, set the rag down atop her plate, rose, and walked back to the staircase without a backward glance.

Damnation.

The bed was small and lumpy, the evening cold. The servants’ rooms weren’t large enough to have a fireplace, and though the chimney of the adjacent bedroom provided a glow of heat that permeated part of the room, the blanket was thin and a steady draft through a crack in the narrow window sapped the warmth from the air. Castiel tossed and turned, unable to ignore the pricks of straw against his skin, unable to ignore the sounds of revelry and debauchery outside, unable to stop himself from imagining what the next day would bring. Castiel was supposed to bring Deanna to Alastair. She knew about the appointment, but surely couldn’t have guessed its import. They’d yet to have an opportunity to speak. She didn’t know what Alastair was, didn’t know what her father had done, had no idea what was in store for her and had no choice but to submit.

It was up to Castiel to protect her.

If she even wanted to be protected.

Maybe Castiel had completely misread this situation. Maybe, if the Princess learned she was biologically a man, she’d want to become a woman.

Still, nothing changed that the choice should be hers. Not the King’s. Not Alastair’s. Not Castiel’s. Deanna needed to know the truth and needed at least a few hours to process it and make a decision
that was best for her.

Except that she wouldn’t talk to him.

Grumbling under his breath, Castiel turned to his other side, bunching the blankets around himself in a vain effort to stave off the cold and the itchy pricks that jabbed his skin.

In the morning, she’d have no choice but to travel with him to Alastair’s. He’d talk to her then. It was better than nothing. In the meantime, Castiel had to get some sleep. The next day would be a trial, guaranteed, and unrested, he’d likely screw things up.

Or, rather, screw things up even worse than he already had.

*If she was here right now I could talk to her.*

*Or…*

*There must be better ways to convince her, right?*

An image formed in his mind of Deanna, her dress loose about her shoulders, her hair a curtain of brown partially obscuring her pale skin.

> Castiel wrapped his hands around her shoulders, slid the dress down her arms. “So beautiful,” he whispered. “I know this is all new to you, but learning this about yourself doesn’t change who you are, doesn’t change how I feel about you or how much I want you. Let me show you that.”

> “Yes,” she whispered. Her head tipped back, exposing the length of her lovely neck, the knot of her Adam’s apple, and Castiel leaned forward and sucked a kiss against the sensitive skin as he skimmed her chest with his fingertips and dragged her dress to the floor. She was bare beneath it, shivering in the cold, and she leaned into him for heat and support that he happily granted.

> Something was wrong – something was different – something hard pressed into his leg but it wasn’t the cold, unforgiving metal of the cage that imprisoned her cock. Glancing between their bodies, his brain short-circuited as he realized her dick was free, erect, small and firm and absolutely perfect.

> “This – this is how I feel,” Castiel breathed. He dropped to his knees, his hands curled around her back, bringing her flat chest against his mouth as he descended inch by inch. She whimpered as he kissed her breast, sucked her nipple, licked a line down to her belly-button, wrapped his hands around her bony, narrow ass and enveloped her small cock with his mouth. The entire length fit easily. Castiel sucked hard and Deanna moaned, sobbed, came almost as soon as he started. With a groan, Castiel reached down, took a hold of his own cock, started to stroke and—

A quiet rap shattered Castiel’s fantasy just as he got his hand wrapped around his thickening dick. When he didn’t answer immediately, a second knock, equally tentative, followed.

> “Sir Knight?” Deanna’s voice was scarce audible through the thick wood of the door.

> *Hey, I could fuck her in truth…*

> …no. This isn’t the moment.

Suppressing a groan, Castiel shoved his cock back in his pants, rose, and opened the door. Deanna’s hand was raised to knock a third time even as she glanced back towards her door uncertainly. As in his dream, her hair was unbound, flowing in straight, gleaming tresses down her back. As in his dream, her dress was loose, her shoulders in reality draped in a blanket to keep the cold at bay. As in his dream, she was the most delicious, beautiful thing he’d ever beheld and he wanted to pleasure her
until she lost her mind of it, until she forgot all about her duties and responsibilities, until, when given a choice, she chose Castiel every damn time.

“I wanted to talk as well,” Deanna admitted. “But I wasn’t sure what to say.”

“One word at a time usually works best,” Castiel said with an encouraging smile, stepping out of the doorway and gesturing invitation for her to enter his darkened quarters.

“My room, perhaps, instead?” she suggested timidly, glancing again toward her door. “There’s a fire laid in there.”

“Excellent reasoning,” said Castiel, and followed as she led the way.

Deanna’s accommodations were nicer than Castiel’s. The bed was wider, the room was larger, the fireplace was of river stone and was fronted by two sitting chairs and a small table, and the water in the washstand bowl yet steamed, refreshed regularly by the servants of the house. Wrapping the blankets snug about her in a movement upsettingly reminiscent of Ruby curling on the bed to mask her disfigurement, Deanna tucked herself into one of the chairs before the fire place and indicated that Castiel should do the same. Where she showed her tension by compressing herself, protecting herself, hiding beneath layers of wool, Castiel showed his by sitting rigidly and properly. He knew what he wanted to say to her; what in the hells did she want to talk to him about that made her so nervous?

Neither spoke.

The fire crackled.

Orange and yellow light danced dim around the room, highlighted her features and made lurid shadows lurk in the darkened corners.

Outside, someone shouted loudly and an answering guffaw erupted.

Wind whistled through a chink in the fireplace.

Deanna stared at her hands.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Castiel asked, voice rumbling.

She opened her mouth, closed it again, and stared, troubled, into the flames. Her eyes shone, lustrous, burnished, rimmed with tears. She mumbled something, but he couldn’t hear her.

“I’m sorry?”

“Why are we in Ilchester?” she repeated, softly but audibly.

“Your father scheduled an appointment for you with Inquisitor Alastair,” Castiel answered automatically.

*Great job. That’s not what she wants to know, and it’s not what you want to tell her, so why would you say that?*

“Right but…” she trailed off. “…but why? I asked about him in the city and no one would even tell me! And the way a few of them reacted…”

*Tell her the truth, you spineless coward.*
“Alastair is a fleshcrafter,” said Castiel. The need to force the words out made him sound harsh and cold, but at least he was finally talking. “While I know nothing for sure, I have suspicions about why the appointment was made and what your father intends for you. But I have no proof.”

There was a beat pause and then, in a rush, Deanna said, “Am I a man?” Castiel choked and stared at her incredulously. “I know it sound crazy,” she continued, looking at him, hands wringing in her blankets. “I know, I know, but I’ve always wondered, ever since I saw my brother’s friend Amy running around when I was young. They were just toddlers, it was innocent fun, but when I came in and found them naked…I didn’t look like her. I looked like Sammy! Surely that couldn’t be right! But Papa told me not to worry about it. He was furious that I’d seen her, furious about…I don’t even know. He said he was angry that what I’d seen had upset me but he seemed as angry with me as he was on my behalf. He told me that Amy wasn’t normal for a woman, and not long after he sent her family away, just as he’d sent away all my nursemaws, all my friends from before Mama died. Sam was so sad and I felt so guilty. I knew all of them had left because of me, and I didn’t understand why. What had I done wrong? But…but I wondered, I always wondered, how could I not wonder? Sammy looks like I do, and so does Papa, but when I managed to sneak into the women’s baths once, the women I saw there looked like Amy, with breasts, and nothing between their legs. Their vaginas didn’t look like penises…I couldn’t even see their vaginas! I didn’t tell my father when I did that. I couldn’t bear to see anyone else’s livelihood taken away because of my inquisitiveness. The servants at the castle were good people; they didn’t deserve exile.”

Tears streamed down Deanna’s cheeks but now that she was finally admitting her fears, she couldn’t stop babbling. “Papa…Papa…he wouldn’t lie to me. I can’t believe that he’d lie to me! He never…except…except Alastair is a fleshcrafter and you’re a man and your body looks more like mine also and my voice has gotten so low and I never developed breasts and I don’t menstruate and what am I supposed to think? Castiel, what should I do?”

Deanna wailed the last question as if the words were torn from her, as if her world was crumbling. Unthinking, Castiel launched himself from his seat and enveloped her in his arms as she slumped forward. Still cocooned in her blankets, she leaned heavily against him, pressed her face into his neck and sobbed. Unsure what to do, Castiel made soothing noises and ran his hand repeatedly down her back as she shook against him.

“Why didn’t—?” She broke off with a choked sound and a hiccup, paused to cough up mucus and saliva, and wiped her nose on the back of a hand. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Shaking his head, Castiel tried futilely to deny the accusation in her voice.

“Why didn’t I—?” She pushed him away, drew up, eyes blazing with passion, shimmering with tears. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

As I should have expected, she isn’t broken. She’s furious. She’s a Goddess.

My Gods that’s terrifying.

“What was I supposed to say, your Highness?” Castiel asked with a sad smile.

“You could have tried, ‘goodness, Princess, I didn’t know you were a man,’” Deanna snapped, “or maybe, ‘by the way, perhaps you should be aware that you possess a penis’ or ‘is your husband aware of your condition’ or something, anything! I…I trusted you, I wanted to trust you!”

“But you’re a fool,” said Castiel before he could stop himself. Deanna drew up as if he’d slapped
her, and Castiel silently castigated himself with every swear word he knew. “I’m sorry,” he said quickly, and she watched him warily. “I’m so sorry. At first, I didn’t tell you because I was every bit the cad I acted. I seduced you when I thought you a woman, and when I found out you were a man the game became that much more entertaining. The longer we traveled together, the more I wanted to tell you, the more I grew tired of being party to the King’s deception, but what could I say? How was I supposed to tell you that you’d been living a lie, that someone you’d loved and trusted had abused you? Why was I to think you’d trust me over your father?”

“Deception…” she breathed. “Abused…oh God.” Her face went white. Apparently, whatever else she’d thought through, she hadn’t gotten so far as realizing all of the implications of what the King had done. “Other men…don’t touch their daughters…the way Papa touched me?”

*Oh you poor, innocent, sweet, trusting, loving child…*

“No, Deanna,” said Castiel softly. “Other children’s parents don’t touch their children in a sexual fashion.”

“And you knew that from the first time I asked for your help?”

“Yes,” Castiel admitted.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“No.”

“You really are every bit the callow, insensitive, selfish man you’ve been acting like.”

Grimacing, Castiel settled back onto his knees on the floor, opening a chasm of space between them. “I suppose I am,” he said. “But I truly am sorry. And I’m not lying when I say that by the time I realized that you had no idea how…unconventional…your upbringing was, it felt like I’d missed my opportunity to tell you.”

“Get out,” she whispered.

“I think that King John has hired Alastair to perform fleshcraft on you to give you female anatomy.”

“And if that’s something you want, great, but if it’s not, I’ll take you away from here, Princess. I will! I won’t let them lay a finger on you if that’s not—”

“*Get out, Castiel!*” she roared, deep and so undeniably male that she squeaked and retreated in on herself. “Please…just leave me alone.”

Rising slowly, Castiel nodded. “As you wish, your Highness. You know where to find me, if you need me. Never forget: you have a choice. I will fight to defend your right to have a choice.”

Stiff-backed, Castiel walked from the room. As he opened the door, stepped out, and shut it behind him, he glanced back. The flames shining on Deanna’s face made her skin tone lurid as she stared into the fire. Her tears had subsided, her expression gone slack and unreadable, and Castiel longed to go to her but he resisted. It wasn’t his place.

*It could* have been his place, but Castiel had ruined that with his selfish indecision.

Poor, poor boy.
Castiel wasn’t sure which of them he meant.
Chapter 7

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Please,” he breathed in Castiel’s ear, trailing long fingers delicately down Castiel’s sweaty back. “Oh, please…”

“Tell me what you want,” said Castiel. He gasped, his cock bucking, as teeth nipped and tugged at his ear.

“Everything. I want you on me – in me – around me – can we…” Deanna shook his head, long hair framing his face.

“I can do that for you.” Castiel groaned as Deanna wrapped his long legs around Castiel’s hips, forced their bodies together, and rutted against Castiel’s aching erection. Trapped between their bodies, Deanna’s cock smeared thin, hot liquid over Castiel’s belly. “All you gotta do is not drain when I fuck you. Can you do that, Deanna?”

“I don’t know…” He trailed off in a guttural moan as Castiel easily, effortlessly slid his cock into the boy’s loose, wet hole. “I don’t know if I can,” he panted as Castiel lifted back up slowly, pressed back in deep. Castiel’s eyes slid shut in rapturous pleasure. He’d dreamed of this for so long – no, they’d made love repeatedly – no, they’d fucked repeatedly – he almost thought he could remember days and nights spent wrapped together, except he was sure that had never happened. His eyes blinked open and he had a momentary vision of Deanna as she once was, chest bound in an intricate bodice, lips rouged, but when he closed his eyes again all he could see was the boy, the man, with whom he was joined. Castiel picked up a slow, steady rhythm, savoring each sigh he pressed out of Deanna’s lungs, adoring the way his legs mimicked Castiel’s movements. “It feels so incredible, Castiel, so…so…oh…”

His legs urged Castiel to thrust faster, harder, but Castiel resisted as long as he could. Finally, Deanna’s plea-broken moans shattered his resolve and he snapped his hips forward. Deanna screamed when Castiel buried his cock in him hard, screamed when Castiel’s balls slapped against his ass, and Castiel fucked him. Deanna’s hips and legs accentuated every thrust, and between his moans and his jerky movements and the tossing of his head from side to side, Castiel didn’t catch when he came, didn’t realize Deanna had climaxed until he registered that the wet squelch he heard wasn’t the sound of the lubricant easing his cock in, it was the sound of Deanna’s come smearing between them. Growling his arousal, Castiel sucked a bruise into the tender skin of the boy’s neck, slowly drew his hips back, and snapped forward. Deanna howled in pleasure and Castiel repeated the movement again, again, until Deanna was hard again, until Castiel thought he’d lost his mind it felt so fantastic, until he came thick inside his Princess, moaning “Deanna, Deanna” like a man possessed, already imagining how good it would feel when he mounted Deanna and took his small cock into Castiel’s tight ass and—

Glass shattered. Deanna gasped, looked around, and vanished. Terror flickered at the edge of Castiel’s awareness and then he snapped out of the dream, snapped back into reality. His awareness crashed into his body – no, that was the crashing of the glass and the snap-snap-crack as the wooden window frame gave way. In the low light of the room Castiel barely made out a form crouched on the headboard of the bed above him before the figure raised its arms, silhouetted black against the navy of the night sky, and brought them down hard. Castiel rolled to the side, dodging, and heard a blade dig with a whoosh-thwap into the pillow, felt the gust of wind as the person somersaulted. Castiel hit the ground hard enough to set his ears ringing. Pain rattled through his face, liquid –
blood, it must be – flooded his mouth, and Castiel struggled to shake off shock and drowsiness so that he could fight back.

*Is Deanna in danger as well?*

A flash of terror brought a burst of adrenaline and Castiel set his hands under him and leapt to his feet. The tininess of the room was simultaneously a blessing and a curse; his sword was close at hand, but there was no place for him to run, barely space to dodge. As he jumped forward to grab his blade, he twisted, instinctually avoiding the blow he was sure was coming. As expected, he felt an icy hot touch along his ribs and then a second burst of pain. Spitting out blood, he swung wide but his attacker leapt over the awkward blow and landed easily, effortlessly, on the floor before him. Dark shapes around them wavered in and out of focus as Castiel struggled to see clearly in the moon shadows. There was a black circle blocking part of the sky – someone’s head, Castiel realized.

There were multiple attackers.

Fan-fricken-tastic.

The first assailant lunged and Castiel moved to deflect the blow. A knife clanged sharp off the metal of his sword. He could scarce see the blade in the dark, unlike his sword, which gleamed, a bead of light twinkling down the sharpened edge and off the tip, distracting him at every movement. The length of his sword, his height, and his reach all disadvantaged him in the close quarters, and only desperate, rapid movements held off his smaller, faster opponent. The second head had vanished from the window.

*Not Deanna – not Deanna – don’t go for—*

There was a sound from somewhere near by – a crash, a clatter, and then it was gone. A fist choked fear at Castiel’s throat in a way he’d not felt during battle since Roman’s men had cornered him in his apartment in Bootbock. He hadn’t realized that Roman was done with him. He hadn’t been prepared. Castiel had thought he would die that night.

He hadn’t, though. He’d survived that, and he’d survive this. His light attacker ducked forward, jabbing their blade up, and Castiel ignored the blow, ignored the tugging feeling that presaged the pain sure to come, and brought his sword down hard on the attacker’s exposed shoulder. The metal cut deep and warmth splattered across Castiel’s chest, joining the steady flow of blood dripping from his chin. The person screamed – a woman, Castiel noted with detachment – and he kicked her body off his sword.

The tip of her dagger was embedded in his side.

Great.

With a grunt, Castiel pulled it free and dropped the blade to the ground.

*If these are Roman’s men the blade’s certainly poisoned…*

He pushed the thought away. There was no knowing if Crowley was the only one of his old employers in town, but there was no reason to think that Roman was there too.

*No reason to think he’s not…*

Castiel quashed his speculations. Paranoia would get him killed as surely as a knife to the back. Turning, he unlocked his door and crossed the narrow hallway to Deanna’s room. He was about to knock when he heard something inside. Knocking would only alert someone nefarious that he was
outside, and would alarm Deanna, so instead, Castiel threw his weight against the solid door as hard as he could and stumbled and fell to the slated floor as the door gave way instantly. Pain lanced from his injured side and back, his teeth bit deep into his lip for the second time, and he coughed on thick blood, splattering the floor before him red.

The door hadn’t been locked.

“Prince—” There was a scuffling sound near his head and Castiel broke off and kipped up just in time to avoid a dagger to the brain. A second attacker danced back from him, but there was room to maneuver and Castiel was done playing games. “Stay down, Princess,” he snarled.

There was no answer.

By the faint light of the fire, Castiel glanced around, ignoring the knife-wielder for a moment. Deanna wasn’t in the room.

Deanna wasn’t there.

Fury incinerated pain and worry and tension. His assailant, clearly expecting a regular fight, was too shocked to react in time when Castiel crossed the distance between them in two broad strides, reached out, and grabbed a hold of their throat. The person knocked at Castiel’s arm with the dagger, sliced stripes into his flesh, cut his shirt sleeve to ribbons, but Castiel didn’t care. He tensed his fingers until they choked and the knife fell from their limp fingers.

“Where is she?” whispered Castiel.

“I—” Fingers clawed at Castiel’s hand but he was too angry to care, too strong for the short person – a man this time, Castiel thought – to effectively fight back. Agility and speed only compensated for so much and Castiel was running on rage and adrenaline. His blood made a soft pitter-patter as it splashed to the floor. “—can’t—” Castiel pressed his thumb into the man’s pulse point and he tried to scream but no sound came out.

“Where is Deanna?” Castiel repeated, easing his grip enough for the man to reply. “I won’t ask you again.”

“Dunno,” he wheezed. “Crow—”

“Did Crowley take her?”

“No – no!” Castiel eased his grip enough for the man to take a desperate gasping breath, then tightened it again, grabbing on with his other hand. Tensing his muscles, he lifted the fellow into the air. Whatever advantages light weight and speed gave the man, in the face of Castiel’s strength they were disadvantages. He scrambled at Castiel’s hands but couldn’t break Castiel’s iron grip. “She – gone – when – got – here!”

“She wasn’t here when you broke in?”

“No!” The man kicked at air and dug his nails into Castiel’s knuckles. His eyes bugged out, inhumanly large and strangely black in the glow of the fireplace embers. “Lemmeg…tellyouany…” He gargled on nothing. Castiel pinched his thumb into the man’s pulse again and compressed his grip. His arms shook with the strain, but he was past caring. Deanna was gone – who knew where! – and these fools wasted Castiel’s time and then dared to barter with him as if Castiel gave a damn about what secrets they thought they knew about Crowley’s operation. The man kicked, kicked, twitched, then went still, and Castiel let the body drop like the garbage it was.
His arms trembled violently; adrenaline coursed dizzily through him. Blood soaked his clothes, pain whispered at the edges of his senses, but Castiel didn’t care. Grabbing his sword, he returned to his room, stomped his feet into his boots, wrapped the coarse blanket around his shoulders, and headed back out, taking the stairs two at a time. The common room was empty save for a single late-night aide dozing by the large communal fireplace. As Castiel’s boots knocked against the wooden floor, the person lifted their head, made a groggy half-noise, and Castiel ignored them, storming outside and letting the door slam shut behind him.

Now what?

Crowley didn’t have Deanna. That much had been clear from what the dead goon had said. Whether Roman was in town was anyone’s guess, and Castiel knew far too little about the situation in Ilchester to know where to begin to look if she’d been taken. They hadn’t told anyone she was royalty, but if word had gotten out she would be valuable. Many people, even in a relatively safe, pleasant city like Ilchester, would be happy to take advantage of an unprotected Princess.

Take advantage of her in more ways than one. I swear, if anyone has laid a finger on my Princess…

…my Princess?

Damn.

“Sir, is everything okay?” The words distorted around a yawn as someone spoke behind him. Castiel wheeled around and found the inn’s night help standing behind him, leaning heavily on the doorway. The woman put a hand over her mouth in an unsuccessful effort to stifle a second yawn.

“The woman I was with – did you see who took her?” he snapped. The woman looked at him like he was out of his mind. Castiel could see her face clearly, he realized dawn beginning to render the sky lighter and muting the dark of night into shades of blue.

“The lady you were traveling with, sir?” the woman asked.

“Yes, she has the dainty black horse, and wears traveling dresses, and—”

“Yes, I know,” nodded the woman. “She left about half an hour ago.”

“With who?” Castiel demanded, angrily getting in the woman’s face. She blinked at him, unintimidated.

“On her own, sir,” the woman said. “She said to tell you not to worry. If you always act like this, I can see why she left without you.” Sniffing disdain, the woman turned and returned to the inn, leaving Castiel standing stunned in the street.

She left on her own.

Why?

…

Alastair.

Damn.

Getting his bearings, Castiel started down the street at a jog. Every breath hurt, the wound in his side tearing. His blood felt chill where it soaked into his clothes and cooled in the wind that set his
blanket-cloak flapping. No one, ultimately, had been willing to tell Castiel where Alastair was, but Castiel knew. It had been included in the instructions that King John had given him. What Castiel didn’t know was how Deanna had found out. He shouldn’t have underestimated her. He shouldn’t *keep* underestimated her. She was amazing, smart, resourceful, lovely, brave…

…and if Castiel was right she had willingly placed herself in the hands of the man who had broken the prostitute Ruby and left her permanently disfigured.

*Fuck!*

Pushing himself to run, Castiel made his way through the shadowed streets, dodging around early-morning pedestrians making their way to their jobs, shimmying alongside the freight wagons that clogged the street delivering the goods that ensured the city functioned. His lungs burned as he ran faster, and faster still. His boots caught on slick spots on the cobble stones. His blood pounded in his ears, throbbed behind his eyes. Every breath rasped through his throat. He didn’t know the city well, but during his exploration he’d scouted the route to Alastair’s atelier. It was an over-fancy name for the dilapidated warehouse on the banks of the river that ran through Ilchester, the air reeking of rotting fish and human refuse.

“Hey, Mister, someone chasing you?”

Castiel ignored the street urchin who shouted after him.

“Watch where you’re going!”

Castiel ignored the wagoneer who snapped a whip at his back.

“He’s over here, over *here!*”

Castiel ignored the woman who shrieked with laughter as she called behind him.

“Fresh fish, first of the morning!”

Castiel ignored the hawkers who flooded the streets as dawn pinked the sky over the rooftops.

Over the sound of his own panting, Castiel couldn’t hear if he was pursued, but he didn’t care. *Let them chase me. Let’s bring this whole mess down on Alastair’s doorstep. If he’s hurt her, I’ll…*

Castiel had no idea what he could do to hurt a Mage, but he would die to defend Deanna, if he had to.

There was no point in pretending any longer that he wouldn’t.

Vagrants stared at him blearily as he turned off the main thoroughfare and wound his way down the rutted dirt roads of the warehouse district. As early as it was, the streets were deserted: those who worked in the warehouses were already attending to their duties, and there was no cause for anyone else to come to the neighborhood. A hopeful beggar accosted Castiel, stepped in front of him and nearly tripped him, but Castiel dodged around, scraped an elbow over the wall and pressed on. If he stopped, he’d have to acknowledge how much pain he was in, how dark and sodden the blanket wrapped around him was becoming. There was nothing he could do about his injuries, so dwelling on them accomplished nothing.

Castiel’s breath made a damp mist in the air when he finally stopped, huffing and puffing, before Alastair’s warehouse. Unlike many of its more poorly built ilk, the building was constructed of huge
chunks of smooth river stone, hardly a chink in the mortar binding the stones together.

*How many screams have these walls contained? She could be in there screaming right now...*

The door was thick hardwood bound and braced by metal supports, as solid a door as Castiel had seen on some fortresses. A bronze knocker in the form of a monstrous demonic face sent a shiver down Castiel’s spine. Every heave of his chest spiked pain through him like he was being stabbed anew. Castiel struggled not to hunch in on himself as he analyzed the situations. The door was a nearly impenetrable barrier, the river stone just as bad. There wasn’t a single window, and the roof was layer upon layer of slate.

*Wait. I’m over thinking this.*

*As far as Alastair knows, I’m supposed to be here.*

Steeling himself, hoping he wasn’t walking into a trap, Castiel went the simple route.

He knocked.

The knocker made a loud clanging noise that Castiel could swear reverberated through the empty streets. Only a moment passed before the door was pulled open by a beautiful young woman, blonde hair curling in loose waves about her face. Her smile was callous and she spared a smirk for the blood dripping from one corner of the blanket draped around Castiel’s shoulders.

“Good morning,” she said. “How may we help you today?”

“I’m looking for my charge,” Castiel said. His voice was guttural, broken by exertion and pain. “I think she may have come ahead of me.”

“And what is your charges name?” she asked with a faux-sweet smile that didn’t touch her hard, cold eyes.

“I am Sir Castiel of Lawrence,” said Castiel, “and my charge is named Deanna.”

“Excuse me,” she said and turned away without explanation. The door slammed in Castiel’s face.

Impatience ate at Castiel as seconds stretched into endless minutes. Occasional workers passed by him, and a single wagon of supposedly fresh-caught fish went by, open to the sun and reeking. Castiel resolved not to eat any more of the local fare, but that couldn’t stop his stomach roiling. The air seemed too thin, his vision fuzzy. Crowley’s asshole assassins had woken him too early, and he hadn’t slept enough. That was definitely why he felt light-headed – it couldn’t be blood loss. He couldn’t afford that. And the fish were certainly why he felt sick. It wasn’t that he was worried for Deanna. Absolutely not. That would imply that he cared.

*I will rip that bitch of a receptionist limb from limb if she tries to stop me getting into the building.*

When Castiel could stand the tension no longer, he used the clacker again, but there was no answer. Finally, after an infinite wait, the door opened again and the woman smiled at Castiel unctuously and, with a semblance of graciousness, waved him into the room.

The entrance foyer of the warehouse was surprisingly plush and comfortable. The room was small; apparently the building had been partitioned into rooms. Fashionable couches lined one wall, delicately carved wood feet digging into an expensive carpet woven in the distinctive style of one of the eastern kingdoms. A mahogany desk faced the couches, gleaming with fresh polish, and a door at the far end of the room led toward the rest of the building.
I went into the wrong line of work. This whole “illegal fleshcrafting” thing looks damn lucrative.

“Did you bring the payment?” she asked.

“No,” snapped Castiel. “Don’t try to deceive me. I know that my master sent the payment ahead of time.”

She sniffed. “You know nothing. You couldn’t even control your pretty little Princess well enough to get her here on time.”

“But she is here?” Castiel demanded.

The woman broke into a broad, predatory grin. “You don’t know.”

“I—” He stopped himself before he could say anything else stupid, anything else that would make this situation even less favorable to him than it already was. “The King said I could watch the procedure,” said Castiel, thinking fast. “I’m simply here for what I was promised.”

“Did he now?” She laughed, her voice rich, almost sultry. A disgusted shiver tingled up his spine. Well, he’d pretended to be an ass to push Deanna away. He could pretend to be an ass a little longer to save her. “You know, we’ve heard about you Sir Castiel,” she continued mockingly. “Quite a reputation in…certain circles. They say you’ll do almost anything, if the price is right.”

“Yes,” said Castiel grimly. “The almost has proved to be a sticking point more than once.”

“King John Winchester has betrayed you,” she said the words bluntly, simply, eying him for his reaction. “You’re not surprised.”

“I’m not stupid,” Castiel replied. “I’m well aware that the trip to Ilchester was a set up, both for the Princess and for me.”

“Your powerful enemies are on your scent now,” she agreed, “and you are unemployed. There is no one who will protect you. Unless…”

“Is this a job offer?” Castiel asked, gritting his teeth against roiling impatience.

“Perhaps,” she smiled cagily. “Would you like to see the Princess now?”

Castiel nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The woman crossed the room, opened the door, and led Castiel down a long hallway. Considering about the exterior of the building, he thought this hall ran along one wall; it was impossible to tell from the inside. Both walls were smooth and white washed, and a plush carpet cushioned each step.

“The compensation would be good, I assume?” said Castiel, playing along. If they thought he was interested, it would facilitate his getting close to Deanna. Or they don’t care. Or this is a trap. How interested can they possibly be in the man slowly bleeding out on their carpet? I just want to grab the Princess and get out – get out of this building, out of Ilchester, out of this entire situation.

Gods, I hope she’s alright.

And I hope she wants to go with me.

“Obviously,” she said. “The rich and powerful come from all over the world to avail themselves of my master’s expertise.”

“I can imagine,” Castiel said. “I hear he’s the best.”
“He is,” she agreed. “He makes the Mage who repaired the scar on your back look like a purveyor of parlor tricks.”

How’d she know about that?

They’ve been spying on me too. Of course they have. I hate this backstabbing bullshit. They’re just like Crowley, just like Roman, pretending to care to my face, pretending to be my ally, while privately deciding that I’m just another expendable pawn to be manipulated around the board.

The woman stopped abruptly and opened a door to her right. “This way,” she said. It was dark within, and Castiel hesitated. “Sir Knight?”

A high-pitched, agonized scream echoed thin and reedy through the opened doorway. Muted, it was impossible to tell where the scream came from, though Castiel thought at least one more door or wall must separate him from the source. The voice was unmistakable, though, and Castiel’s chest clenched tight. He’d heard Deanna scream in pleasure; listening to her scream in agony was like sharp pincers being taken to his flesh. The sound faded away but Castiel could swear he could yet hear it ringing terror and agony through his skull. Schooling his face to impassivity, to disinterest, he stepped through the doorway into the room.

Carpet was soft beneath his feet, and as the woman stepped in and closed the door, Castiel blinked and realized it was not completely dark. The far wall was limned in a faint glow that formed a square. Silhouetted against that backdrop, the woman crossed the room and reached for something that clattered and swayed, allowing in more and less light as it did. By the ghostly pale light that seeped in, Castiel could make out elaborate decorations and the fanciest furniture he’d seen since he left Lawrence. A line of gleaming light appeared in the center of the wall before him, so bright Castiel could make out nothing beyond, and the gap grew wider and wider until Castiel’s eyes adapted and he could make out a pristine room, separated from his by a huge glass window. Castiel had never seen a piece of glass so large or so transparent; the cost to make and transport such a thing was mind-boggling. Blinking, trying to focus, Castiel waited for his sight to resolve, dreading what he might see.

Please, if there is any goodwill toward me in the heavens or hells or in between, let her be alright.

“Lilith, is our new friend watching?” asked a drawling, nasal voice. The speaker was a blur of sumptuous red cloth and gaunt features, and before him…

Castiel choked back bile. Deanna lay naked on a metal table. Thick leather bands encircled her ankles, her thighs, her waist, her shoulders, and her wrists, and a thinner band prevented her from lifting her head. Her eyes were wide and terrified. A thin line of blood leaked from her mouth and was much easier to think about and process than the long, surgical cuts along her chest and crotch, tracing the outline of where breasts and a vagina might soon be, if Alastair and the King had their way. Fleshcrafting didn’t require actual cuts be made, but Alastair didn’t appear to care. Deanna’s hands were clenched into fists, her breaths came in desperate, loud pants, her muscles strained against her bindings, and her flaccid, uncaged cock and balls lay limp, scrunched tight to her body with fear and cold.

The woman – Lilith – smiled viciously at Castiel, baring her canines.

Reason suggested that Castiel should wait this out. Fear and rage had driven away his blood-loss induced dizziness, and the course of action he should pursue was obvious and cautious. This was not an ideal moment to act. He had no idea what Lilith was capable of, no idea what Alastair was capable of, no guesses on what magical defenses might be arrayed around the building, no idea what guards might surround him, what traps awaited. Long, hard experience had taught Castiel to expect
traps within traps. That had been how Crowley and Roman had treated him. If he acted now, even
assuming he was able to rescue Deanna and somehow defeat Alastair, they’d be virtually helpless
before the storm. There were so many rational, compelling reasons to wait.

Alastair plunged his scalpel into the smooth, pale flesh beneath Deanna’s belly button. She screamed
in agony, twisting against her bindings.

Castiel’s brain short-circuited.

Crowley, laughing as his guards beat Castiel again and again, beat him until he learned to defend
himself, beat him until all he wanted was to be strong enough to kill those who had torn him apart
time and time again.

Crowley, laughing every time he took away anyone Castiel befriended, anyone Castiel made love to,
whether they were old or young, loyal or disloyal, part of the organization or not.

Castiel, laughing as blood stained his hands brilliant red, dyed his clothes, splattered his face,
coated his lips, trickled into his mouth.

Roman, laughing as he explained that he knew that Castiel had spirited away the new slave, and
that the price of the boy would be Castiel’s to recompense, and the means for him to do so would be
to negotiate with the whores in Bootbock’s brothel for their children.

Crowley, laughing as he encouraged Castiel to take the children and use them as he would.

No. Even in Bootbock we don’t rape children!

Poor Castiel, still so naïve and hopeful even after everything. What do you think happened to
Gabriel?

Eyes narrowing, all sense of pain and fear flew away. Castiel had failed time and time again to
protect those who were most vulnerable, those who depended on him, those who loved him, those he
loved. His hand was on his sword hilt – his sword was in his hand – Alastair was twisting the blade
in Deanna’s gut – Lilith was frowning – Lilith’s eyes were wide with shock—

Her jaw dropped when he cut her head off in a single smooth strike. Her skull made a solid thump as
it hit the glass, and Castiel didn’t slow his blade, instead driving it through the priceless window. The
thick material resisted for a moment and then shattered, scattering glass and blood into Alastair’s
torture chamber, and Deanna screamed again.

“I’m afraid I will not be able to accept your job offer at this time,” said Castiel.

“Ah, the daring knight appears,” Alastair sneered, turning from where he worked at Deanna’s side.
Red gleamed like rubies on his finger tips.

How many people has he hurt? How much blood is on his hands?

“Castiel?” sobbed Deanna.

How many times over has he earned death?

Castiel wasn’t sure if he meant Alastair or himself.

I want to do better. For her, I have to do better.

“I’m here, Princess,” he vowed. “Stay strong.” He put a foot on the window frame to launch himself
in; glass dug into his boots, crunched beneath his weight, cut into the arch of his foot. Castiel felt like he was moving through molasses, every movement slow and exaggerated as Alastair turned with a wicked grin on his face, fingers weaving arcane gestures in the air before him.

“Exorcizamus te,” Alastair chanted, “omnis immundus—”

He broke off with a ragged groan. Shocked, Castiel froze and tore his eyes away from Alastair.

Deanna had a hand free.

Deanna had pulled the scalpel from her abdomen and stabbed Alastair in the back.

She could scarce reach him, her body twisted awkwardly against her restraints. Only one of her wrists was free, and Castiel had no idea how’d she’d done it. Tears squeezed from her eyes, blood burbled from her mouth, and she was the most spectacular, lovely creature Castiel had ever seen.

*I’m in love.*

Castiel cleaved his blade into Alastair’s shoulder. Alastair didn’t make a sound; for a moment he looked confused, stared at Castiel, glanced down at the blade, and then his knees went out. His corpse fell with a thud, and Deanna slumped back against the gurney, sobbing.

“I’m going to get you out of here, Deanna.” Castiel’s voice shook; adrenaline surged through his body so powerfully that he trembled. With fumbling fingers, he attacked the metal buckles on the leather straps, working her other wrist free first so that she could help him undo the other clasps. She didn’t move, though.

“I didn’t want this,” she wept.

“I know – I know you didn’t,” he replied reassuringly. “I should have warned you – I meant to warn you, but then we started talking and we got side tracked and – this is my fault.” Frustrated with his inability to undo the buckles, he reached down and tore the scalpel from Alastair’s back. Blood bubbled up around the hole, sluggish and dark. The blade was razor sharp and glimmered brilliant crimson in the bright light; Castiel sliced at the tough leather and cut through it easily.

“I wanted to be the woman my father would have expected me to be,” she continued as Castiel hacked at her restraints. “He’s…he’s counting on this alliance and I can’t…I can’t go there like this but I changed my mind – I asked the Inquisitor to stop – but he wouldn’t, he wouldn’t, and he—” The last restraint came free and Castiel scooped an arm beneath Deanna and hoisted her into his arms. She choked and cried out and tumbled against him, wrapped her arms around his neck and convulsed in sorrow. “It hurts,” she managed in a garbled whisper.

“I know,” he whispered, running a soothing hand over her hair. “We’ve got to get out of here. I need you to stay strong a little longer. You can do that – I know you can do that. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.” Taking the blanket from his shoulders, Castiel wrapped it around her to cover her nudity.

“I am?” she mumbled, rubbing her tears and mucus on a bloody corner of the blanket. She started as red smeared over her hands and face. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s nothing,” he said quellingly. Time was burning and he had no idea what protections Alastair might have in place, what magical notifications might have gone out upon his death.

*If he’s really dead… who knows what a Mage like he might be capable of.*
“It’s not. You—”

“We have to leave,” Castiel cut her off. “Now.”

“But—”

Deanna squawked as Castiel lifted her up and spun her onto his back. Her long limbs wrapped around his neck and waist, and she was heavy, but Castiel had to get started while his energy still surged. As soon as it faded, he’d collapse – they likely both would, judging by the injuries they’d sustained. In the meantime… Castiel crossed the room, skirted Alastair’s corpse, and tried the door. He’d not be able to carry Deanna through the window frame. Fortunately, the door was unlocked. A long corridor led perpendicular to the one that Castiel and Lilith had taken, but the two didn’t appear to intersect. Castiel picked a direction at random and charged, throwing open doors as he went, seeking an exit. Most were chambers like the one where Deanna had been held, but there wasn’t another soul around. Finally, Castiel kicked a polished wood door in and it revealed a study, all dark mahogany and gleaming gilt fixtures, and though they were no closer to finding their way outside, he stepped into the room and looked around. Papers were stacked neatly, books lined the shelves, and riches glimmered uselessly on every surface.

All their things were at the inn.

They certainly couldn’t go back there.

Two strides took Castiel to the desk, and he grabbed a bejeweled ink pot, a fine quill, a crystalline statue carved in the shape of a monstrous dog, and a paperweight that couldn’t actually be one enormous ruby, but certainly looked like one.

“Casted – Sir Knight – what are you…?” Deanna stammered as Castiel passed everything to her. Something sharp dug into his shoulder, and she adjusted her grip around his neck to rearrange the blanket into an impromptu sack.

“We have no money,” he explained. There was a portrait of the Inquisitor on the wall that felt like it was staring at them. Scowling, Castiel grabbed the frame and tore it down.

A safe was hidden behind the hideous painting.

“Jackpot.

“We’re going to be on the run for an indeterminate amount of time. We need a way to support ourselves, and Alastair is dead. No one will miss this stuff, and we won’t be in more trouble for stealing it than we are for murdering him and Lilith. Now be quiet, I have to listen.” Setting his ear to the side of the safe, he used one of the few minor spells he knew to start flicking the tumblers. It was a complex lock, but Crowley had taught Castiel well – Crowley had punished failure severely – and one by one the lock mechanisms clicked into place, chunk – chunk – chunk – and the door popped open.

“How’d you…” Deanna trailed off and Castiel felt her jaw hit his ear. Within the safe was a King’s ransom of jewels and jewelry. Glancing around for something to hold the riches, all he could see was a pot with an ugly, moldy-looking plant that was probably poisonous. Castiel tugged his shirt out of his pants and passed the bottom hem up to Deanna. Pain whispered beneath his adrenaline-fueled hyperness as the cloth tore free of the scabs forming around his wounds. Ignoring it, he shoveled the loot into his shirt, as much as it would hold. Deanna choked on an amazed sound.

“That – that’s my mother’s tiara!”
“It’s probably how King John paid for your ‘treatment,’” Castiel said. The worn, torn cloth was beginning to give way, the threads snapping between his fingers, but there was still more in the safe. It didn’t matter, he supposed. They already had enough to flee halfway around the world in luxury if they wanted. It was a far cry from when Castiel had fled Bootboc with only the clothes on his back.

_Though now, as then, I’ll have the hounds of hell nipping at my heels._

“Hold tight, Princess,” said Castiel, slamming the safe shut and heading back out the study door. “We have to run.”

They ran.

They ran down the halls of Alastair’s warehouse until they found their way outside. It felt like a lifetime had passed while he’d been within, so Castiel was shocked when they emerged into dazzling sunlight and hot mid-morning. Deanna hid her face against his shoulder, but her grip on his neck didn’t weaken and her hold on the trove stashed in his short never wavered. The gems and precious metals rattled and clattered as Castiel jogged laboriously toward the inn. His instincts said to run and never look back, but their few belongings – Deanna’s only change of clothing – their horses – were back at the stables.

_And the dead bodies in our rooms…_

Thinking better of it, Castiel turned and ran in the opposite direction.

“Sir Knight!” Deanna objected.

“We can’t go back there,” Castiel panted. The burning sensation was back in his lungs, multiplied five-fold, ten-fold from earlier. His legs ached under the strain of carrying her weight, and Castiel tried not to think how much attention they must be drawing, two bloody forms running through the streets of Ilchester, heavily burdened, clearly fleeing…spotting a deserted alley, Castiel ducked down it, found a doorway set into a building, and collapsed. Deanna groaned, reminding Castiel that he was not the only one injured. She slid off his shoulders and teetered, leaning heavily against the wall, swaying like she was caught in a breeze. One glittering stone bounced free of their stash to shine amidst the filth reeking in puddles in the rutted dirt ground.

“Hey!” someone snapped, voice muffled. “You can’t stop there. This is private property!”

Searching for the speaker, Castiel looked all around. Deanna watched him fearfully, clutching the blanket close around herself. Something hit Castiel in the head and he looked up. A woman leaned out of a second floor window, holding a rotten potato and getting ready to throw it.

“Let us in and we’ll make it worth your while,” he countered, taking one small gemstone from their stash. The woman’s eye popped, and she disappeared from the window. Moments later, the door opened.

“Pay up!” she said, holding out her palm. Castiel gave her the stone and she bustled them into the house, hauling Deanna along when she struggled to support herself.

“I’ll need a change of clothing for each of us, too, and a few minutes to catch our breath, and then we’ll be out of your hair,” said Castiel, watching Deanna with concern. She was pale, swaying, her eyes unfocused.

_Don’t faint, don’t faint, don’t faint…_

“Take all the time you need, sugar,” she said sweetly, but her gaze flickered suspiciously between
Castiel’s belled shirt and his sword as if assessing her chances of stealing all of their ill-gotten gains. He glared viciously, discouragingly, her way.

...we don’t have time for all these theatrics.

“I’ve already killed four people today,” he grated. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” she said. “I’ll get your clothes Sir Knight.”

She left the room.

“Princess, are you alright?” Castiel demanded.

“No,” she whispered miserably, “I may never be alright again.”

“I will get you out of the city,” Castiel promised. “I will keep the authorities from finding us. I will protect you from anyone who comes after us, even the King, if that’s what you want.”

“And if it’s not what I want?”

“Let’s focus on escaping from Ilchester. We can get our bearings when we’re back, safe, in the wilderness.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 8 will post on February 12th, 2017.
“Why are you…” Deanna trailed off, whimpering, as Castiel knotted a torn off strip of blanket around her middle. The wound below her belly button wasn’t severe, nor were the cuts to her breasts or thighs, but all bled copiously. Seeing Deanna pale, trembling, stunned, stirred every tender feeling that Castiel thought a lifetime had ground out of him.

He was done fighting himself on this.

“You don’t know me, Princess,” Castiel said, tearing another length free of the sodden blanket. “Don’t presume to know why I do what I do.”

“I’d like to know you,” she murmured, watching his every move. “But you won’t let me.”

Their campsite outside the city was barely adequate, a stand of rocks with a low overhang that gave them barely enough room to sit upright. The night was chilly and, as if they hadn’t had a difficult enough day, clouds had rolled in and a steady drizzle had commenced as they’d fled on two nags that Castiel had bought for a pittance.

“I don’t know what—” She hissed as Castiel placed the next bandage over the shallow cuts on her chest. The blanket was soaked through with blood and water. Deanna’s skin was clammy, the edges of the slices in her skin curled and white and puffy. Castiel had seen many wounds go sour in his life and a litany of worries paraded through his head. He shouldn’t worry about her. She shouldn’t matter to him. Castiel couldn’t afford to let anyone matter to him.

People who mattered to him got killed.

“I don’t know what to do,” she concluded miserably, brushing limp, soaked tresses from about her face with a shaking hand.

“Survive,” said Castiel. His voice was rough with exhaustion and pain, but he held concerns for his own health at bay. They hadn’t any blankets, any food, any dry clothing. He didn’t dare lay a fire. Though he’d seen no signs of pursuit, and the rain was something of a blessing because it would mask their scent from Crowley’s hunting dogs, they were still close to the city. If not for the night and the thicket around their rock safe haven Castiel suspected they’d be near enough to yet see Ilchester’s walls.

Their only source of light was a small, dim globe that Castiel had summoned. It seemed deadly bright compared to the night but Castiel knew, intellectually, that it was so faint that, with the rain obscuring their hiding place, it’d not be visible from even ten feet away. The glow it gave was so dim Castiel couldn’t make out their horses, tied to a nearby tree.

Castiel’s thoughts yet ran through the advantages and disadvantages of the spot he’d chosen for them, an endless litany drilled into him by long experience. The trees were thick. The rain dampened smells. The overhang protected them. They were too close to the city. The light might give them away. The Princess might get sick. They had no medicine.

They had money, but they couldn’t eat money, they couldn’t burn money for warmth, and given how valuable their trove was, they’d be hard pressed even to barter with it in the villages through which they’d pass or with the farmers whom they’d meet. No one as bedraggled as they came upon such riches honorably.

They should travel farther now, in the dark, sleep during the day, lay snares, eat their meat raw.
The Princess would collapse if Castiel tried to force her into the saddle again.

Neither of them had slept much the night before.

Getting rest would be cold comfort if Crowley or the city guard caught them.

Alastair might have been reviled, but he’d still been a Mage. No one would that much money was undefended.

The Princess wouldn’t collapse. She was consistently so much stronger than he gave her credit for. She was so beautiful, even wounded, with her gorgeous eyes bloodshot and her freckles a smattering of pox-like dark dots vivid against her snow-white skin.

“What is that why you are the way you are?” she asked. Castiel started and shook his head, trying to remember what he’d said and what she might be talking about. She reached out and skimmed a hand against his unshaven cheek, along his shoulder, down his side. His wet shirt clung to his chest, a dark brown spot marking where blood from the stab to his side had soaked through. “You’ve tried to survive alone all this time?”


Gabriel.

“Yes,” said Castiel, swallowing an incredible tide of grief. He couldn’t think about them any longer. He couldn’t let them haunt him. He had to live. “Everyone is alone, Princess.”

“Oh.” Deanna’s hand fell away, her expression dim and distant.

Castiel sighed. “No. I didn’t mean…” His shoulders slumped. He always made her feel like shit. What was wrong with him?

I’ve got volumes one through ten ready for your perusal, if you really want to know what’s wrong with yourself. Volumes eleven through ninety-nine are still works in progress. If you keep insulting her I can compile all of the instances of your being an ass into a special commemorative hundredth volume. And when you get her killed because you messed with her father’s perverted plans for her, that can be volume one hundred and one.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’m trying. I want to be a better man for you, Princ…Deanna.”

“Then why are you always so cruel?” she whispered, gazing up at him alluringly through her lashes.

How can I protect you? I can’t. The people who are going to come after us are so much more powerful than we are. They hold all the cards, have all the troops, project all the appearance of righteousness. I’m just the renegade Knight, never well trusted to begin with, who has compounded a lifetime of sin by kidnapping a Princess. They’re going to kill me, and even if they don’t kill you they’ll destroy you.

They’ll make you just as cynical and broken as I’ve become.

I will never let that happen.

“You have no idea how much it hurts to feel again after a lifetime of having all tender emotions beaten out of me,” Castiel murmured. His tone was flat and neutral; only by pretending not to care could he even speak the words aloud. Judging by the way Deanna’s eyes widened earnestly, the way her lips parted slightly in surprise, she understood how difficult a confession it was for him. “You
are…Deanna, you have the most beautiful soul of anyone I’ve ever met. It shines so brightly…it
casts my every sin in stark relief. It hurts to be around you. It hurts to…to care what happens to
you.”

“But you do care?” she asked shyly.

“I’d die for you,” Castiel whispered. The confession was agony, and Castiel tore his eyes from her,
stared at the dirt-covered rocks beneath them. His gaze traced the spiderweb of old dead vines that
crept over the floor to a single leaf at the edge of their stone shelter, green made gray by the faint,
wavering light of his bespelled light globe.

Cold fingers brushed his cheek and Castiel turned back to his Princess, his vision of her swimming.
His eyes were full of tears.

What is wrong with me today? Why am I remembering so much? Why am I feeling so much? I hate
this as much as I love—

A tear fell as he cut the thought off. He couldn’t think about that, didn’t dare to think about that.

“Castiel,” she murmured.

“I’m making this about me,” he stammered, trying to shake her hand away, but her fingers tensed
and she refused to move. “You’ve had…you’ve had so many shocks in one day. What can I do for
you, Princess? Are you hungry? I could set some snares, perhaps I’d catch a rabbit or a—”

Castiel couldn’t have said how their lips came into contact. Deanna didn’t rush to him; she slid
languidly, curled her body against his while hardly seeming to move, brought their mouths together
gently, and though every movement was telegraphed Castiel was taken completely by surprise. Her
lips were chapped and cold against him and, stunned, Castiel didn’t kiss her back at first. A wounded
sound caught in her throat and Castiel died a little, as he did every time he knew her to be in pain –
especially when, as was so often the case, her pain was caused by his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered against her lips, and pressed into the kiss. She whimpered, a very different
sound from the quiet, hurt noises she had leaked while he treated her wounds. Castiel wrapped an
arm around her shoulders, drew her close, kissed her firmly, aggressively. The hand on his cheek
dropped to his shoulder, draped over his back, and her other arm snaked around his waist, pulling
their bodies closer together. Their lips came together, apart, together again, their heads shifting to
new angles, their noises brushing and bumping. For the first time since they’d left Ilchester, Castiel
didn’t feel the nip in the air. Heat burgeoned in his gut, pulsed through him with every heartbeat. He
needed to feel every inch of her pressed against him, needed their bodies entwined, needed to feel
her heat, needed to heat her through with his own body. Grabbing her around the waist, he tugged
her hard into his lap, his tongue flicking against her lips. She parted for him and he savored her
cooperation, her willingness, her enthusiasm, her tender touches and the sweet flavor of her saliva
and the pliancy of her youthful body as she pressed against him.

I love—

Panic burst in his thoughts and Castiel broke the kiss off abruptly, drawing away from her with a
gasp.

“Castiel?” she asked uncertainly.

“Princess, I—”

“Is it because I’m a…a…?” she trailed off.
“It’s because I’m an asshole, and a coward,” Castiel replied as reassuringly as he could. Whatever she’d intended to say was irrelevant. Deanna wasn’t the problem. Deanna was perfect. Castiel was, and always had been, the problem.

“You’ve offered to take on multiple kingdoms to protect me, and you think yourself a coward?” she scoffed and brushed another kiss against his lips, but he couldn’t reciprocate.

“I—”

“You charged into the atelier of a powerful Mage to rescue me when you could have fled alone, with none but me to know if you’d stayed away,” she continued. “You carried me from the city, though wounded. You got us horses. You could have chosen to abandon me. I know I’m a burden. I know I’m foolish and naïve and ignorant. I know you’d rather someone worldly, someone able to defend themselves, someone more like yo—”

“No,” Castiel interrupted, kissing her to shut her up. Balthazar. Hannah. Inias. She squeaked and then melted into the kiss. Anna. Meg. Gabriel. “It’s not you.” Kiss. “You are never the problem.” Kiss. “The things that have been done to you—” Kiss. “—the way I have behaved—” Kiss. “—none of it has been your fault.” Kiss. “You’re a victim, Deanna—” Kiss. “—and you don’t even know it.” Kiss. “I think you’re perfect.” Kiss.

“Castiel!”

“Absolutely perfect,” he breathed aggressively, kissing her to silence before she could object.

I love you.

Her protests subsided into muffled sounds that caught in her throat, half-moans, half-complaints. Castiel could spend a lifetime kissing her and never get enough. He was relieved to feel her warming beneath his fingers, to feel the clammy dampness slowly ebbing from her skin. If she took ill – if her wounds became infected – he’d never forgive himself.

“You’ve had one hell of a day,” he murmured against her lips. “I know you may need time to figure out what you want to have happen next, where you want to go from here. Whatever you decide, I’ll help you.” I have no one else left, nothing else left. I cannot fail you as I’ve failed everyone else. I’d sooner die. “But you don’t need to know now, or tomorrow, or next week. We have time. I’ll make sure you have time.”

“I know what I want,” she breathed.

“It’s okay if you—”

“I want you, Castiel,” she interrupted, and pressed another kiss to his lips. “I’m not sure about anything else, but I know, I know, I want you.”

Not for the first time since he’d met her, something in Castiel’s mind snapped, but instead of inducing panic or fear this time, he felt a sudden burst of peace unlike anything he’d ever imagined, anything he’d ever been allowed previously.

“You have me,” confessed Castiel. “I think you’ve had me since the moment this journey began.”

Since the moment the berries pearled red juice on your gorgeous lips, the moment you asked me about the geopolitical history of giant territory, the moment I found out you were a man, the moment you didn’t even blink when I murdered someone in your defense.
You’ve had me all along, Princess. I squirmed to resist but I think on some level I always knew it was futile.

It’s only been a month but I love you so much it terrifies me. Every day I fall a little farther. Or maybe…maybe I ascend. Maybe this isn’t one of the hells – maybe this is heaven. Maybe, in helping you, I can earn some modicum of forgiveness for the things I’ve done, the things I’ve allowed to be done to others.

Deanna didn’t try to speak more, and Castiel had nothing further to say. Lingering kisses grew longer, slower, more tender, until they slumped against each other in fatigue, unwilling to draw apart, unwilling to separate for a moment. Finally, Castiel eased Deanna to lie on the cold, hard ground and lay beside her, enfolding her in his arms and allowing his light spell to fade to nothing.

“You’ll be here when I wake up?” she whispered fearfully into the darkness.

“I’ll be here,” promised Castiel.

What are you doing, you fool?

What I should have been doing all along.

As torn as he was, Castiel was sure of one thing.

This was where he belonged.

Placing his lips against the back of Deanna’s neck, wrapping his arms carefully around her injured middle, entwining their legs together, Castiel allowed his exhaustion to overtake him.

Finally, he’d found something worth fighting for.

The first gray glow of dawn woke Castiel early. He was groggy with fatigue and his body ached all over, cold set into his bones and his joints.

I’m getting too old for this shit.

Ten years in Lawrence had made him soft, comfortable, dull. Castiel wasn’t sure exactly how old he was – silly things like birthdays hadn’t mattered to his adopted family, Crowley had far more important things than Castiel to focus his attention on – but he thought himself approaching 30 when he fled Bootbock. Then, he’d felt scared but he’d also felt empowered. After a lifetime crushed under a yoke of oppression that was such a constant of his life that he’d taken its presence for granted, Castiel had finally tasted freedom, and the exhilaration of it gave him the strength and courage to face any trial. Now, he’d overcome once already, remade himself once already, built a new life once already. He had been comfortable in Lawrence. He didn’t want to start again. Adventure was for younger men.

Deanna murmured in her sleep and snuggled closer to him, huddling for warmth.

That feeling of freedom I felt then…is that what she’s experiencing now?

Castiel pressed his face against hers, breathing in the humid air that she breathed out. He tangled one hand in her disheveled hair and used the other to pull the battered blanket more tightly around her. At least it was dry now, his blood and hers mingled to make a large black stain.

If anyone in the world deserved a chance to explore, to find the world, to find themselves, it was
beautiful, precious Deanna. Castiel didn’t delude himself that he would be able to hold off the many groups likely to come after them, but if she wanted to fly free, he would facilitate that, protect her as long as he could, give her as much independence as he could. When the consequences of their actions finally caught up with them, maybe he could delay the inevitable long enough for her to flee, to find a sanctuary…

“Don’t go…” she breathed, shimmying closer to him, voice laced with panic and sadness.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he murmured reassuringly, cradling her body against his. “I’m right here, Princess.”

“Papa, don’t…”

Castiel’s blood ran cold. It wasn’t him she was dreaming of, it was her father. What a fool he was. He’d constructed this elaborate fantasy, clung to the idea that after his multitude of sins perhaps he could be Deanna’s Knight after all, but he hadn’t considered what she might actually want. She loved her father. She’d agreed to this arranged marriage because she loved her father, willingly played the part of the dutiful daughter because she loved her father, even gone to Alastair’s because she wanted to be the woman that her father wanted her to be. Castiel was deluding himself that she’d want to run away with him. Deanna was spectacular: beautiful, brave, brilliant. At the cost of her masculinity – a biological happenstance over which she’d had no control – she could satisfy her beloved father and have a chance at dominating the world, and chance shape history. Compared with such opportunity, why should she want to go on the run with Castiel? Eyes filling with tears, Castiel hardened his heart.

Whatever she wants, I will accommodate. Perhaps if I help her achieve her dreams, whatever they may be, she will offer me protection in exchange.

But will she really choose power? She wanted to flee. She wanted to keep me as her consort on the side when she was wed.

But she also went to Alastair. She’s also devoted to her father.

I need to stop thinking I know her mind. She is unfathomable. There is nothing for it but to wait and speak with her.

A sinful, hitched moan muffled against Castiel’s skin. Deanna’s hand bunched the fabric of his shirt, one of her legs rubbed between his. Castiel swallowed hard, struggling to repress sudden arousal.

In the end I’m really just a disgusting pig. I can spend all that time agonizing and wondering and pledging my undying nobility in her defense and the moment she makes an alluring sound all I want is to flip her over and fuck her, even though she’s still asleep and hasn’t given me permission to do so.

Adorable, irresistible noises were scarce repressed in Deanna’s throat. Her eyes fluttered, though yet closed in sleep, and her throat bobbed and twitched around each noise.

It’s her fault for making such delicious noises.

Castiel’s cock was half-hard against her. She was pressed so close that there was no way he could hide his erection, no way he could shift away.

Really? That’s your self-defense? Do you think that’s how the King defended his disgusting behavior to himself? It was her fault, for having such feminine features, for being so pliant and willing and obedient, for having such a tight, gorgeous ass, for trusting him so completely that she didn’t
question his perversion?

He wanted to rut against her, wanted to fill her, wanted to hear her come screaming his name again.

She’s a victim. Whatever else happens in the days to come the worst thing I can do is make her a victim again.

Whatever else happens, the choices must be hers.

I will follow wherever she leads. To the very gates of the lowest depths of hell.

“Hold me,” she whispered.

“Is it me you want or your father?” said Castiel bitterly before he could stop himself.

“Huh?” Deanna startled, drew away enough that she could gaze at him blearily. “Castiel…” She shook her head, shook off his hand, shook tangled locks of hair from her forehead, shook away her sleepiness, but she didn’t otherwise separate from their warm embrace. “You. I wouldn’t want to be here with anyone but you. I don’t think I could face my father now, knowing what I now know. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to face him again.”

“I’m sorry,” said Castiel. “If I’d known while we were in Lawrence, I’d have…”

…done absolutely nothing differently.

“Do not apologize for ignorance,” she said firmly. “Apologize for the cruel inconsistency with which you’ve trifled with me over the past month.”

“I have apologized for that,” Castiel said with a smile, “and will continue to do so until I earn your forgiveness.”

“Am I still a game to you, Sir Knight?” she asked. She was not smiling. Her eyes were a stern challenge. Gone was the unsteady paleness of the night before; she was once again the Princess who had coldly watched Castiel murder someone in her defense, the woman who, the previous day, had torn a scalpel from her own belly and sunk it into the back of her torturer.

“You are my Goddess,” breathed Castiel, captivated. “I don’t play games when the stakes are my own life.”

With a dazzling smile, Deanna brought their lips together. Castiel was so stunned by her strength, her magnificence, that he could scarce kiss back, but his body reacted automatically to the stimulus. His blood flowed hot, his cock thickened further. She deepened the kiss, assertively, clumsily thrusting her tongue between his lips. As always, her inexperience showed but her eagerness to learn, to explore, to touch, and to feel left Castiel breathless.

I can teach her – train her – she’ll be the perfect lover once I’ve…

…treated her as a toy, the same as her father did?

Abruptly disgusted, Castiel broke off the kiss, pulling away from her as far as the confines of their small shared blanket allowed.

“We haven’t time for that now,” he said harshly. For what? For feelings? For sorting out our relationship? For fucking?

For making love?
“Oh!” She flushed and bit her lip, looking away shyly. *How is she both these women at once – the one who takes control so possessively and the one who seems so ashamed of her desires? I don’t know how but I love it.* “Of course not,” she continued, flustered. “We must…um…”

Throwing the blanket aside, Castiel rose to his hands and knees, turned from her, adjusted his cock in his loose pants, and looked back over his shoulder. Everything he owned save what he’d worn to confront Alastair was lost. All he had now were his blood-stained breeches, his torn and battered tunic, and his sword belt and blade. At his sudden movement, one of their mounts started, stomped a foot with a dull thud against the packed dirt and dead leave ground of the thicket, and tugged listlessly against the reins. The two horses they had acquired were flea bitten, mangy, old, and Castiel suspected one was lame, but they’d been cheap and no questions had been asked. They were better than no horses at all. Or, at least, so Castiel hoped.

Deanna stared at him, confused by his behavior, but as soon as their eyes met she blushed a deeper red and wrapped the blankets more snugly about herself. She had even less than he; the woman who had sheltered them had provided a shapeless dress of thick homespun, undyed, fiber in natural shades of brown and white. The wool smelled of sheep and worse, and bore several dark places where her blood had soaked it. Their bag of gems made a large bundle tied in a saddle blanket on one of the flimsy, mediocre saddles they’d acquired with the horses. The only place nearby to get supplies was back in Ilchester, but Castiel didn’t dare return there.

*Time to take this seriously.*

“What do you perceive our options to be?” asked Castiel, settling back into a cross-legged position, ignoring her hurt expression and her attempts to disappear into her blanket, wrapping it around herself like armor.

“I…” She paused, took a deep breath, and transformed. Gone was her shyness, her weakness; instead she was confident, self-assured, bold. “I’m not sure I know enough to make that call. How did you sustain your injuries, Sir Knight?”

*I hate when she calls me that. I wish she’d call me Castiel. Or Cas, or Cassie…

…no, never Cassie. Remembering Gabriel hurts too much, and he is all I see every time I hear that nickname.*

“I believe that King John had a double purpose in sending us to Ilchester,” Castiel explained. “The first you know, and I’m certain is truth – he contracted with Inquisitor Alastair to use fleshcraft to render you biologically female before your wedding.” Deanna flinched when Castiel mentioned her gender, but then she gathered herself and seemed to grow stronger by the moment, shoulders back, radiating surety.

“Do you think he knew about Alastair’s other…proclivities?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Castiel admitted, “but I’d guess that either he didn’t know, or he decided that the ends justified the means.”

“I see.” Her voice was cold steel. Castiel wondered what she was thinking, how she was coping beneath the mask she’d assumed, but he couldn’t ask. “And what was the King’s second purpose?”

“This one is more conjecture,” Castiel warned. “Before I came to Lawrence, I made powerful enemies in Bootbock. Fergus Crowley and Richard Roman.” He paused, but there wasn’t a flicker of recognition at the names, though both were internationally known. *So sheltered. Kept pliable through ignorance. The King has so much to answer for.* “From the day we started this journey, I
wondered why the King sent you to Ilchester with only one Knight for escort, and why of all his Knights he chose me. My theory is that he was counting on my being exactly the type of person I’ve warned you I am—cshall and self-interested. I think he guessed that even if I managed to learn the truth about you—” She flinched again. “—that I wouldn’t care. Only a small number of people must know your actual gender—” And again. “—and I suspect that the King has quietly dealt with those people over the years. I believe that he set me up—inform me enemies where they could find me and intended that I should die in Ilchester. While I have no proof, I saw Crowley in the city, and two of his hired assassins came to our inn and attempted to kill me. That’s why we couldn’t go back there yesterday—their bodies were in our rooms. My best guess is that expected me to die in Ilchester and that he had a formal escort awaiting you in the city to take you to your betrothed with full honors…” He hesitated for a moment but forced himself to finish the thought. “…once your biological gender matched your projected one.” He wouldn’t pussyfoot around her simply because talking about it made her uncomfortable. Her penis wasn’t going to go away through denial, any more than it went away after a lifetime of being kept in a cage.

_The cage is off now…how must that feel for her?_

“Do you think that Lawrence has a diplomatic entourage somewhere nearby?” she asked.

“I think that Lawrence has _soldiers_ somewhere nearby,” corrected Castiel.

“So I’m a…” she trailed off, grimacing.

“You’re a man, Princess,” Castiel said bluntly. Her defiant bravery faded, her shoulders slumped, and she shot him a hurt look. “Don’t try to manipulate me with that coy expression. Two nights ago you were furious with me—legitimately, justifiably so—for not telling you the truth. Now, every time I say it, you crumble. You can’t have it both ways. I understand that this is difficult for you, that you would rather hide from this, but no matter what you choose to do next you will face trials and you have to be strong. If you’d rather I keep lying to you, tell me now. I can pretend you’re a woman, pretend that everything is peachy, pretend that you would be safe with your father or with Prince Michael.”

“No,” she said. “No, don’t do that. I am a _man_. I may not…like it, or be comfortable with it, but you’re right. I’ll try to do better. Thank you for telling me the truth now, for continuing to tell me the truth. It’s the only way I can be sure that you’re not still…the way you were. As I see it, our options are: one, return to Lawrence and throw ourselves on my father’s mercy; two, return to Ilchester and seek a fleshcrafter to complete what Alastair intended; three, proceed to Vermilion and ask for my betrothed’s protection; or four, set our own path.”

“Yes, I—”

“I’m not finished,” she said imperiously. The Queen was back. Thank the Gods. “For option one, given what he did to me, I am disinclined to ask my father for _anything_. On some level I always knew that other families were not like ours, but I told myself, why would they be? My father is King. I’m a Princess. My needs are different, and my options for seeking solace in the arms of a partner are limited. My virtue had to remain intact—” Her voice broke on the word. “—in the interest of furthering Lawrence. So I quieted my questions, repressed my concerns, trusted where I should not. I’ll not be such a fool again. My only worry now is for my brother. I’d like to contact him and make sure he is alright. If my father harms him…”

“Do you feel that your father harmed _you_?” Castiel asked, unsure if he should bring the matter up but unable to stop himself.

“I don’t know yet,” she conceded, eyes staring over his shoulder at a void between the trees beyond
their cubby hole of a cave. “For our second option, I do not know if we’ll be able to find another fleshcrafter with skill enough to do what is required – it is illegal, right?” Castiel nodded. “Also…I’m not sure yet if that’s what I want. This must sound absurd to you, but I’ve only just...become...a man. My entire identity has been revealed a lie—”

“That’s not true!”

“—and whatever happens now, I will never again be the same woman I once was, sanguinely accepting that my body is how it is regardless of my suspicions and observations about others. Whether through fleshcraft or some other means, I will be remade by this, but I don’t yet know what I will be remade into, and I do not want to do anything irreversible until I know what I want to be when all is said and done.”

Castiel was so awed by her that his mouth was dry and his palms sweaty. Some small, ridiculous part of him was truly tempted to prostrate himself on the ground and declare himself unworthy of being in her presence. That she had processed her new reality so quickly, seen to the heart of her conundrum so thoroughly, was incredible. With a fraction of the disruption to his life, Castiel hadn’t gotten as far in understanding himself though he’d had years. All the truths that he hid from – about his actions, his culpability, his intent – she laid them bare by her willingness to self-examine and cope with her reality in whatever form it was presented to her.

“Does that seem reasonable?” she asked uncertainly. Unable to find any words, Castiel nodded. “The third option also seem problematic – why should...why should Prince Michael...” She shot Castiel an uncertain look the meaning of which eluded him. “…why should he want me when I’m not a woman? Men do not…I mean…”

Oh.

Leaning forward, Castiel took her face in his hands, turned her gaze to meet his.

“Some men enjoy the company of other men,” said Castiel. Startled, she tried to look away, but Castiel held her and kissed her. Despite her apparent reticence, she returned the kiss gently. “I prefer men to women. Is that your worry? That I’d not want you? I’ve known what you were since the first night you asked for my help and my interest hasn’t waned.”

“I know…intelligently I know…” she breathed, kissing him again desperately. “I don’t know what I am – who I am – but I know I want you. Only you…”

Only you, Princess.

“…and I don’t even know why...your behavior...yet I look at you and I think...I think impossible things...” She stammered the words between passionate brushes of her lips, her hands grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him closer to her. “I want you...I want you...I want—” With a gasp, she tore herself away, breathing hard. “I’m sorry – that was...we need to decide on a course of action.”

“Yes,” said Castiel dazedly. One way or another, she was going to be the death of him.

“Who will come after us if we run?”

“Who won’t come after us if we run? Lawrence will send troops to retrieve their Princess, Vermilion to rescue their Queen-to-be. Despite Alastair’s ill repute odds are that Ilchester will not let his death pass, either. And Crowley is certainly after me. Roman may be as well.”

“Can you think of anyone who might be willing to shelter us?” she asked. There was a hint of panic
in her voice, strange coming so soon after her frantic kisses. Castiel wondered what she was thinking, what her fears were. Faced with the helpless confusion and frustration she must be experiencing, Castiel felt helpless himself, useless. The wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Why should anyone expose themselves to do that?” Castiel countered wryly. “In all my journeying, all over the world, I only ever found once place where the rulers were selfless enough to take in a hunted castaway.” She looked at him hopefully, then her face fell as she realized what he was implying. “Lawrence has been my haven for a decade, but in the past month I’ve learned that the King is a molester, and now I strongly suspect that he offered me sanctuary with this end in mind – knowing that I could be easily disposed of when his plans for you came to fruition.”

“He’d never…” She stopped herself, tears rimming her eyes. “I don’t know. I thought I knew him, thought he loved me, but so much of what I thought is wrong. I don’t know what to believe, or who to trust.”

“You can trust me,” Castiel vowed.

“Can I?” she asked sadly.

“I will do my best for you, your Highness,” said Castiel, getting on a knee and bowing his head to her. Part of him rebelled. What was he doing? Conviction was a wonderful feature shared by every corpse he’d ever met. Pragmatism had kept him alive.

At what cost?


Too high a cost.

“I’m yours to command,” he said roughly, throat gone dry. “I will follow you, to whatever end.”

“We seek a place of safety,” she replied, crawling from their cave, rising and shucking off the blanket. His Goddess was back, and she was glorious, and she looked on him kindly. Warmth like the sun coming out after a storm seemed to radiate from her, radiate through him. “We run until we find it.”

A will-o-the-wisp leading them on…trusting wildlife surrounding a placid pond fed by a crashing waterfall…

“There might be one place, your Highness,” said Castiel, emerging from the cave after her and looking up into her radiance. The sun haloed her, made her appear a Goddess in truth, and Castiel felt how profoundly unworthy he was to guard her.

“Then lead the way, Sir Knight,” she commanded. Her proud expression broke into a smile; she leaned down, put a finger beneath his chin, tilted his head up, and kissed him on the lips, then on the nose, then on the forehead like he was a child and she the elder. “I trust you, Castiel.”

“Deanna,” he whispered.

After a lifetime pretending he needed no one but himself, Castiel had finally found his cause. Some men followed a flag, others a creed, others wealth or fame. Castiel had tried all of those and found each wanting.
His Goddess was named Deanna, and Castiel was the most pathetic of Knights: his cause was love, and when he let himself think on what the future might hold, he knew in his heart that this cause would be the death of him.

Deanna could slay him with a word, pierce him through with her eyes, strike him dead with a caress, fell him with a kiss, and by all that was unholy and holy if she let him fill her with his cock he’d probably die of bliss.

At least he’d die a happy man.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

SURPRISE!
I didn't want to give advanced warning in case I epic failed to deliver, but I had been thinking that when I finished my review/edits on the manuscript, I'd up the posting rate to two chapters a week. I finished on Monday, so surprise, you'll now be getting updates to this story on Wednesdays and Sundays!
Now that I'm done I can confirm that this will be 20 chapters long, so it'll take about a month and a half for me to post the rest. I hope you enjoy!

In the gray of pre-dawn, Castiel blinked awake. Something was wrong – something was missing. He was too cold. Confused, he opened his eyes, gummy with exhaustion that a short night’s sleep had done little to remedy. He and Deanna had ridden all the previous day, but the need to keep away from the roads had slowed them and they’d covered half the distance back as they’d covered on pavement days before as they’d ridden at a leisurely pace to Ilchester.

Deanna!
Panic set in as Castiel realized that she was what – who – was missing. Jerking upright, he had a hand on his sword – kept alongside their blanket roll – and was on his knees before he registered his surroundings. Deanna and the horses were the only other creatures present. Deanna stood facing the eastern horizon, where a thin line of impossibly bright light crested the tree line. Silhouetted by the rising sun, she had her long hair held tight in one fist and a blade in her other hand.

“Dea—” Castiel broke off, reaching for her, as she brought the knife down hard. The sharp blade cut easily through every strand of long hair. For a moment, she gazed at the tresses in her hand, and then she opened her fist and let a sudden breeze carry them away.

“My name was – is…” She paused, took a deep breath, and turned to him. The contours of her face were stark in the harsh light, her expression defiant. “I think my name is Dean. My mother…before she died, mama called me that. Papa…King John said it was a nickname and forbade me to continue using it after she died.” She paused again, then said firmly, “I want you to call me Dean.”

“No,” said Dean. “Neither Princess nor Prince. I am not of Lawrence any longer. If Sam wasn’t there I’d happily never think of it again.” She – he – didn’t sound happy about the prospect. Resignation and determination shared equal parts in Dean’s reply. “Also, may I borrow one of the outfits you acquired yesterday?”

Nodding, Castiel went to his bags and silently dug through them. They had passed an isolated farm the previous day, stumbling into the fields that were unexpectedly cut into the thick forest. Though they’d intended to avoid all human habitation until they were several days from Ilchester, the encounter had proved a boon. The farmer had traded them his entire wardrobe in exchange for a single gem from their stash. They’d been ludicrously over charged but Castiel didn’t care. Money was worthless to them; a shirt that didn’t stink of mud and blood and worse was priceless. Sadly, the man hadn’t had a wife or woman in the house, so Deanna – Dean – was still managing with her
same sad dress. Castiel pulled out the nicest of the shirts, soft worn flannel, and a pair of breeches that would fit her too loosely at the waist and come up short below her knees. He held them out and she took them. Face set with resolution, she stripped naked and re-dressed in the men’s outfit.

No.

His knees. He took them. He stripped naked.

Damn, this was going to take some getting used to.

For him more than me, I'm sure…

“I’m ready to leave when you are, Sir Knight,” Dean said. Even the false softness was gone from his voice. He was brash, loud, and low.

“I'll saddle the horses,” Castiel agreed.

He’d never wanted to fuck anyone so badly in his entire life. When Gabriel had first told Castiel about blue balls he’d laughed. Surely nothing like that existed. A man could masturbate whenever he wanted!

Castiel couldn’t masturbate whenever he wanted, and if he didn’t get his dick in Dean, he might just die of it.

For the umpteenth time since the previous morning, he smiled as he reiterated that at least he’d die a happy man.

He’d never been properly happy before in his life. He suspected it’d be a long time before the novelty of the sensation wore off.

“Sir Kni…Castiel!”

Castiel startled awake as Dean shook his shoulders. His first instincts were to rise – how many mornings am I going to get woken suddenly? I’d forgotten how annoying it was to be constantly on high alert, the way the tension ratchets up every hour, every day, when nothing bad happens – but he couldn’t. Dean was over him, atop him, holding him down.

“What’s wrong, Dean?” asked Castiel.

“I am – I mean,” he shook his head. “Look at me! I don’t know what’s wrong!” Dean leaned back onto his heels, straddling Castiel, filling his head with thoughts he didn’t dare act on. Every inch of Dean, from his head to his toes, was delicious and perfect. His hair was a disheveled mess of haphazardly cut strands that fell over his ears and tickled at his neck. His loose shirt was open and untied, showing the skin beneath and a hint of the unbandaged cuts to his chest, healing nicely, thank the spirits. The flowing cloth didn’t touch his flat chest at a single point as he hunched over, and the large pants hung low on his hips, revealing his delicate sunken hip bones, resting lightly over…

Oh.

Oh.

“Congratulations on your first erection, Dean,” said Castiel dryly.

“What is it?” asked the boy desperately. “What do I do? I feel…I feel…” He shook his head, not having the words for it.

“You know…”

“I can guess,” Castiel agreed, “but you have to tell me.”

For a moment, Dean seemed to battle with himself, and then he surrendered. His arms fell back at his sides, his knees spread apart, his weight settled on to Castiel’s thighs, and the bulge of his erection became more prominent.

“Touch me,” Dean begged.

With a possessive growl, Castiel surged off the ground and grabbed him. Dean gasped as Castiel wrapped an arm around his shoulders, socketed Dean’s hips against Castiel’s quickly growing cock, and laid a palm over Dean’s dick.

“Oh!”

“I can finally teach you,” Castiel hissed in Dean’s ear. “I can finally – I can finally pleasure you like you deserve.” He kneaded aggressively at the hardness, abrading it with the cheap fabric of the pants, and Dean exclaimed again, melting against Castiel.

“That feels…it’s so…”

Castiel bucked against Dean, thrusting his hips, grinding his cock against Dean’s ass as he stroked at Dean’s cock.

“…intense…oh, wow…oh…”

Dean broke off in a garbled moan and jerked against Castiel, tense, twitching, and Castiel knew the boy was done already.

“I’m so—” Dean gasped, shuddered, collapsed against Castiel. Wetness soaked through the fabric of his pants. “Not supposed…quick…”

“The first time someone else touched me I came in about 5 second flat,” said Castiel. Even though I was only 14 and I didn’t want Crowley to touch me. “Don’t worry, it gets easier to not come immediately with practice.”

Slumped against Castiel, Dean rolled his hips against Castiel’s aching cock. “Have to…practice…whole lot,” he whispered contentedly.

With a groan, Castiel came, clutching the boy close to him and thrusting raggedly against his balls and the sensitive place between Dean’s cock and hole.

“Do you have any idea how crazy you make me?” Castiel grunted, vision of the morning blanked with pleasure.

Dean chuckled.

“I’m learning,” he said with a mischievous smile. “And I like it. I like it a lot.”

Deanna sank into the plush mattress, long hair fanning about her, a coy smile on her face as she reached for Castiel. She wrapped her slim arms around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. She
needn’t have bothered. All she needed to do was crook her pinky and Castiel would come running.

Thick blankets pooled around them, unnecessarily, luxurious. The room was overwarm, a blazing fire brightly lighting everything and keeping the winter cold at bay. Naked, Deanna was comfortable, her nipples pink and flush with her chest until Castiel ran a finger over them and they puckered, tightened, seemed chased his touch as he continued to skim his touch down her chest, along her slim waist, and down to her cock. Even fully swelled, she was small, her foreskin pulled back to reveal the sensitive red head beneath, already damp with pre-come. She moaned and arched against the bedding when he cupped her loosely and stroked, skilled fingers squeezing more beads of thin, murky liquid from her body.

“How may I worship you, Goddess?” he murmured hot in her ear, focusing his attention on teasing her balls taut and sucking light kisses behind her ear and down her neck. She shifted beneath him, her legs lifted and wrap around his hips, her muscles tensed as she urged him forward.

“Fuck me,” she implored, “fuck me, fuck me, fuck me—”

Castiel was inside her, slick and easy and hot and loose. Her arms were around his sweaty back, the pulse of her legs against his hips set his pace, her desperate breaths beaded moisture on the side of his face.

“Anything for you,” Castiel swore, and he meant it, demons and saints protect him, he meant it with every fiber of his pathetic, worthless being. “Anything, my Deanna, anything, anything—”

A distressed cry tore through Castiel’s sweet dreams, and for the third morning in a row Castiel was abruptly awoken by Dean. His muscles tensed in distress and Dean’s cry broke with a pained grunt that forced Castiel to take in their positions. Dean’s back was pressed to Castiel’s front; Castiel’s arms enfolded to boy, both somehow snaked beneath Dean’s clothing. One cupped the slight rise of a breast, the other curled around Dean’s crotch, fingers spread around the base of the boy’s hard cock. Castiel’s dick was hard and lined up against Dean’s ass.

“Shit,” Castiel muttered. “I’m sorry, Dean, I—”

“No!” Dean interrupted, distress deepening as Castiel started to draw away. Castiel froze in place. “My face, Sir Knight, feel my…” Dean shuddered out a quiet sob. A hand reached down, rucked up Dean’s shirt and took hold of Castiel’s hand, tugged it up to Dean’s face. The skin was smooth, touched with a delicate peach fuzz of morning stubble that Castiel longed to rub his cheek against, and for a moment Castiel couldn’t figure out the problem. He a run firm thumb over fine cheek bones, an aquiline nose, a prominent brow, along the rim of one delicate ear, and skimmed down Dean’s chin, mussing the strands of hair as he went, and—

Hair.

“I bet the cage was ensorcelled,” said Castiel. “To prevent you from developing as a boy normally would, so that others wouldn’t find out the truth. So that you wouldn’t find out the truth.” Dean stuttered through a second irrepressible sob.

“I really am a—” Dean broke off with another cry that he tried, futilely, to muffle with his hand. “…I’ll grow a beard and I have a penis and I don’t have breasts and I’ll never have children and—”

Dean choked on his sobs and curled in on himself, pressed back against Castiel.

Normally, emotional outbursts pissed Castiel right the fuck off.

Normally, his response would have been, yup, you’re a man, you’ve always been a man, suck it up,
There was nothing normal about the way Castiel responded to Dean.

“We can shave the beard,” Castiel murmured soothingly. “We can find another fleshcrafter – there must be more – and we can change you however you want, so that you can have children, so that you’ll have breasts. If that’s what you want most I’ll make it happen, Dean, somehow, and—”

“No – I don’t know,” the boy cried, tearing Castiel’s heart apart with every sob. “How am I supposed to know? I don’t even know who I am, everything I thought was a lie, everyone I trusted —” Dean’s voice cracked. “And I should have known! I’m such a fool! Our inner circle was always small – it’s custom,” he hiccupped, “it’s custom in Lawrence that royal children are kept in private to protect them and give them a chance at a normal childhood. But after mama died everyone left, all my friends, all my caretakers, and now as we ride all I can think is – did papa – did the King send them away because they knew the truth? Did he hurt them? Did he kill them? I can’t believe he’d do such a thing, but I can’t believe he’d…what he did to me…but it doesn’t feel wrong! When I think about it, when I look back, it still feels like love, I still think that he loved me!”

I am going to kill John Winchester.

“Think he did, in his way.” Castiel tried to sound reassuring, but fury made his voice bleak.

“How do I know you’re not lying to me?” Dean hissed, tugging against Castiel’s hold. Castiel shifted his hands instantly, let Dean pull away, escape the blankets, scramble across the bare dirt of their campsite until his back slammed against a tree. “I only have your word that…that I’m a…my father wouldn’t, Papa wouldn’t—”

Sitting up, Castiel shucked off the blanket. His side twinged, his cock yet made a bulge in his pants. “Is that really what you think?” asked Castiel mildly. “Your Highness, you know precisely how self-interested and selfish I am, but I’ve risked everything for you. Why would I do that? Why would I lie?”

“I don’t know,” said Dean, staring terror at Castiel through tear-filled eyes. “Why did you lie to me in the first place? Why did you try to seduce me? This is just…this is just the latest inconsistency, the latest trick, the latest time you…you acted one way while your words suggested something else entirely.”

“If you want to go back to your father in Lawrence, I will take you there,” promised Castiel.

Maybe this is for the better.

“If you want to return to Ilchester and find another fleshcrafter, I will take you there.”

Maybe I should let her think I’m at fault.

“If you want to ask sanctuary of Prince Michael and Vermilion, I will take you there.”

Deanna deserves better than me.

“Anywhere in the world you want to go, I will take you there.”

She deserves better than John Winchester, too.

“Would you take me to Bootbock, if that’s what I wanted?” Dean snapped.
Castiel blinked slowly, a surprising terror clawing at his chest at the thought of returning home. “That would be a death sentence for me,” admitted Castiel. But... “But if that’s what you wanted, yes, I would take you to Bootbock.”

With a wail, Dean collapsed in on himself, collapsed against the bole of the tree, wrapped his arms around his knees, pressed his face to his thighs and sobbed.

“You’re right to suspect me,” Castiel continued inexorably. “I have been a terrible person since long before you met me.” Uriel. “I’ve let people I loved be killed and done nothing to protect them.” Anna. “I’ve murdered good people in cold blood because the worst men I knew ordered me to do so.” Meg. “Don’t trust me.” Samandriel. “I don’t trust me.” Hannah. “Everyone I love dies.”

Gabriel.

Something in his words seemed to break through Dean’s grief. The boy’s head jerked up and through puffy, red eyes, he stared at Castiel.

“Your Highness...” Castiel took a deep breath. He had no idea what he was going to say but there were words clawing to be free and he knew that if he opened his mouth they’d come spilling out. “Dean. I’ve lied to you repeatedly. I’ve kept things from you that you deserved to know. But this is the simple truth: what John Winchester did to you from the time your mother died is not normal.” Dean shook his head as if to deny the truth of Castiel’s words, but Castiel pressed on. “I have never seen a boy’s cock caged by a chastity device as yours was. I have never known a father to finger his son’s ass as yours did. I’ve never met anyone who has been as thoroughly sheltered, deceived, and groomed as you. If I were a better man I’d have told you the truth as soon as I realized the depths of the depravity to which you’d been subjected but you were so thoroughly convinced, so utterly naïve, that I hadn’t a clue how to proceed. At first I told myself it wasn’t my responsibility to disillusion you, but even then the excuse rang hollow. I said nothing because I had no idea what to say. What would you have said, in my place?”

At the last, Gabriel forgave me, though I didn’t deserve it.

Dare I hope that Dean will do the same?

Fearful, chest tight, shocked that he could still feel so much, Castiel dared to look up at Dean. His tears had dried, leaving his cheeks streaked red. He was wide-eyed, mouth ajar.

“You love me?” Dean whispered.

Shit. Did I say that? Did I admit that? I don’t...I can’t...

Castiel opened his mouth, closed it again, at a loss. “How do you do it?” Castiel whispered. “How do you take everything I am, everything I’ve worked so hard to become, and strip it away as if it were nothing, as if it were garbage? Dean, I...I’m not the person you want me to be. I can’t be the person you want me to be.”

I don’t know who I am anymore.

If I’d been a good man when I was younger, would everyone still be alive?

No. If I’d been a good man when I was younger, they’d all be dead, and I’d have been killed too.

I can’t be the reason Dean dies. When Crowley and Roman catch up to me...

...but I don’t want to give Dean up. I want to be a good man, for Dean.
“I don’t know who I am anymore,” Dean whispered, a perfect, disturbing echo of Castiel’s thoughts. “I don’t know my name or my gender. I lost my future, my family, my home. I don’t know where I’m going. I don’t know what’s true. I look like a man, I know that intellectually, but I still feel like the same woman I’ve always been. The only thing I know, the only thing I have left to cling to, is that when you hold me I feel whole. In your arms, I’m not broken. In your eyes, I’m still beautiful. In your embrace, I feel warm. So please...please stop telling me that you’re not who I think you are. Please stop lying to me. Please stop pushing me away. I don’t know what or who to believe any more, but I love the way I feel when I’m with you. If I have nothing else to cling to, please at least let me have that – let me have you, Castiel.”

“Dean—”

“Please!”

Helpless, Castiel stared at his beautiful Princess, licked his lips, and was shocked to feel a tear role down his face. “You have me,” he whispered. “How I feel about you scares me to my bones, your Highness. You aren’t broken. You are the most beautiful person – man or woman – I have ever met. I wouldn’t die to protect my own brother—” I killed Gabriel. I couldn’t have been more responsible for his death if I’d held the knife myself. “—but I would die for you.”

“You’re scared.” The astonishment of revelation swept over Dean’s face. Slowly at first, then more quickly, he unfolded, crossed the space separating them, knelt before Castiel, lifted his hands and placed them on Castiel’s scruffy cheeks. “You’re scared. You play yourself off so worldly...but you’re just as frightened as I am. And you’re not scared of who’s chasing us, you’re not scared of my father, you’re not scared of the future – you’re scared of me.” Castiel attempted to blink his tears back; he failed and they spilled chill down his cheeks.

Can you ever forgive me, Princess? For not protecting you? For not protecting Gabriel?

“I’m scared of you, too,” Dean admitted. “After the way you’ve treated me...I want to believe in you so badly. I need an anchor or I’m going to sink, or float away. I can’t...I can’t do this alone.”

“You can,” said Castiel, dazed, confused. He hardly recognized himself. Something desperate and terrified in his head screamed to pull away emotionally and physically, to protect himself, but he couldn’t move. He didn’t want to move. He wanted Dean. “You are the strongest, most capable person I’ve ever met. I’m no one, Dean. I’m a failure. As an infant my parents decided I was too much trouble to deal with and gave me away. In comparison to you, I’m—” He shook his head. The tears kept falling, irrepresible. He hadn’t cried when he’d first understood he was a slave. He hadn’t cried when he’d killed his first man. He hadn’t cried when he’d watched his friends die, hadn’t cried when Gabriel had been taken from him, hadn’t cried when he switched allegiance from Crowley to Roman, hadn’t cried when Roman betrayed him, hadn’t cried when he’d been stabbed in the back, hadn’t cried when he lost everything over and over again. Everything in his head inveighed against him, tangled feelings of fear and self-loathing muddling him, mixing him up, tearing him to pieces. Through blurred vision he tried to see what his Goddess thought of his weakness, but he couldn’t. Dean’s fingers were cold and slack against Castiel’s chin.

If you knew half the things I’d done – a tenth of the things I’d done – you’d never let me near you. Unless—

Deanna’s eyes had glimmered with exhilaration when Castiel had killed a man who dared insult her. Unless—

Injured and in pain, Deanna had stabbed her attacker in the back with a blade dripping with her own
blood.

Unless—

Dean leaned forward and brought their lips together. It had been mere days since they’d started being intimate, truly intimate, but already he was much more skilled at kissing. His tongue was warm against Castiel’s mouth, his lips plush and gentle, every movement slow and deliberate. Castiel’s eyes slipped shut, forcing two more fat tears down his cheeks, and he lifted a shaking hand to Dean’s face, snagged soft prickers of hair with a nail.

Each of us was remade against our wills. Maybe together we can figure out who we would have been, had others not interfered.

“Do you love me, Castiel?” Dean whispered against his lips.

I will kill John Winchester for breaking you, and I will kill Crowley and Roman for breaking me, and I will never let anyone hurt you again. Or I will die in the attempt, and at least will be spared having to see what happens to you when the inevitably I can’t protect you.

“I do,” Castiel confessed.

Desperate for a taste between Dean’s lips, Castiel surged forward, wrapped a hand around his head and delved into Dean’s mouth with his tongue. His morning breath was a little foul, his mouth a little gummy and dry, and if Castiel needed any further proof that he was completely gone on the boy, it was that he didn’t mind at all. They were both breathing hard by the time the kiss broke off, and Dean drew away, laid his forehead against Castiel’s, rubbed their noses together with a happy sigh.

“I’m sorry I’m a monumental asshole,” said Castiel solemnly.

Dean snorted a laugh. “But you’re my monumental asshole?”

“For as long as you’ll have me,” Castiel agreed.

“And no more lies? No more bursts of aggression when I get too close?” he asked hopefully.

“I’ll…” Castiel swallowed, throat dry, and slid a hand to cup Dean’s chin. No more lies. “I can’t promise that,” he admitted. Dean started and Castiel felt something tenuous between them snap, felt the wonderful moment draining into the miasma of miscommunication that had entangled them since day one. “Wait, Dean – please.” Dean froze. “I’ll tell you the truth, I will, unless I must lie to protect you.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “Every time. I’m through with misguided misogynistic older men who make sweeping decisions supposedly in my best interest.”

“Fair enough,” conceded Castiel. “I’ll tell you the truth,” he repeated, “but I can’t promise not to lash out. If you knew…”
“Then tell me?” asked Dean hopefully.

Impossible. I can’t. If he knew...Dean has already given me so many chances, forgiven me so many trespasses.

Which would be worse – telling him or not telling him?

“What are you thinking?” said Dean, disappointment thick in his voice, but he didn’t draw away again.

“I’ve never told anyone,” Castiel whispered. “Not since Gabriel died, and that was decades ago. I don’t know if I can.”

“Whenver you’re ready,” Dean said wisely, so intelligent beyond his years, so caring, so foolish and trusting.

I wish King John had never given me this assignment.

“We should get moving,” said Castiel, breaking contact between them.

Dean let him.

Castiel was simultaneously grateful and heartbroken.

They had work to do – literally, metaphorically, and figuratively.

As Castiel tidied up their campsite, dowsed the fire and buried the ashes along with the bones of the rabbit he’d snared the previous evening, Dean stared at him, unmoving, eyes wide, but Castiel didn’t meet his gaze.

I can no longer imagine what my life would be like without Dean, yet I don’t trust him enough to tell him the truth.

The ways in which he deserves better than me are so manifold that I could spend days spelling them out and not be done.

With all the world to choose from, I will never understand why Dean chose me.

Silently, Dean rose, folded up their blankets, tied the rolls behind his cracked, cheap saddle, and mounted.

“Ready when you are.”
Three days out from Ilchester, Castiel had seen minimal signs of pursuit. They kept away from the road, though Castiel scouted in that direction from time to time, and skirted around any signs of habitation, even those that were obviously deserted. The lack of pursuit seemed to hearten Dean, or perhaps their conversation that morning was the cause for his broad smiles and carefree attitude throughout the day, but the apparent sanguineness of those they fled from made Castiel increasingly nervous. Even with the precautions he’d taken, magic should be able to track them easily. The expense of such spells usually precluded their use except in extreme cases, but surely the murder of a Mage and the abduction of a Princess counted as an extreme case?

The weather, always erratic in the winter, had finally taken a turn to the pleasant. The evenings were still chilly but the daytime sky was a pristine, clear blue striated with wisps of white clouds, the sun dazzling, the temperature warm enough that their meager clothing was adequate. They traveled through thin forests and along ridgelines, searching for unpopulated stretches of the valleys so that they could cross safely. Their zigzagging course was frustrating, required that they cover double or more the distance as if they’d been able to take to the roads, but Castiel refused to grow complacent because of the apparent lack of an organized search for them. Alastair might have been too disliked or too feared in Ilchester for his death to prompt consequences. Prince Michael might have been as reticent about his betrothal as Dean had been. But after the effort King John had gone to in the grooming of his son – his daughter – damn, now that Deanna was going by Dean Castiel couldn’t figure out how to think of the boy…girl…person…in his head – Castiel couldn’t believe that the king wouldn’t hunt them until he seized once more what he had always believed was rightfully his. If there was one thing that John’s behavior made clear, it was the extent to which he considered Dean property, to be used however he wished.  

“What are you thinking?” Dean asked, breaking through Castiel’s introspection. From the ridgeline along which they road, they had a good view of the valley below, and Castiel mentally mapped the route they’d have to take to avoid the multitude of farms that mosaicked the fertile river banks. It was the third time that day that Dean had asked the question, at random intervals after long periods of silence. Castiel didn’t understand what Dean was up to.

“There’s a river – do you see it there?” Castiel pointed below, where sunlight twinkled off the unseen waters. Trees hid the course, a patch of forest that stretched from one side of the valley to the other, a farm on one bank flush in vibrant green, the other bank bright red with a crop the nature of which Castiel couldn’t guess. Dean looked where Castiel pointed and nodded. “I’m thinking that we should follow it, as the trees will give us shelter. If the water is shallow enough, we can drive the horses through it, which will also keep dogs and other hunters from being able to scent us. Let’s go.” Castiel kicked the flanks of his mount, hoping for a trot, but all he got was the same deliberate, slow walk the nag had maintained for the past three days. Attentive to every detail of the world around them, Castiel was surprised to not hear the sounds of Dean starting his horse moving as well. Glancing back, he caught the boy watching him, but upon being noticed Dean rolled his hips to urge his mare into motion.

A few minutes riding over exposed flat land brought them to the tree line, stealing Castiel’s view of the valley, and he relied on his mental map to lead the way. With the lovely weather, the forest was alive with movement and sound, and Castiel’s nerves thrilled at every rustle and half-seen flicker of color. If only he had eyes in the back of his head! If only Dean was as alert to danger, was trained
and knew what to look out for! An over-loud flurry of sound to his right caused him to jerk around,
his back and healing side twinging, in time to see a flock of ravens settle into a scraggly bush
-growing in a circle of sunlight shining through a gap in the canopy. Relieved, Castiel let out a breath
but the tightness in his chest didn’t ease. He’d never been this nervous when he’d fled Crowley and
Roman the first time.

On some level, I thought I deserved to have them catch me, thought I deserved to die.

I still think that, come to think.

But Dean…he deserves a chance.

“This is what I mean,” said Dean, a trace of his feminine lilt punctuating his voice. “I know you’re
thinking something, but what? Do you see signs of pursuit? Are we in danger? Not knowing is
driving me crazy. Please, Castiel.”

“I don’t know,” said Castiel, frustrated. “I don’t see any sign that we’re being followed and I don’t
know why not. Do they not care? Are they waiting for us? There must be a reason…”

“I’m sure they care,” Dean replied. “The alliance between Vermilion and Lawrence is important to
my father, though he wouldn’t tell me why. Sam was unhappy about it.”

“Did your brother say why he was unhappy?” Castiel didn’t know the younger sibling well; Sam
was only 14 years old, but theoretically he was to be the next king and Castiel had seen signs that the
boy was being trained accordingly. Several Knights oversaw Sam’s training in combat, tutors taught
him about politics and geography and economics and foreign languages, and he stood at his father’s
right hand on the days when the palace was opened to petitioning citizens, helping and advising and
learning the whys and wherefores of the decisions that John made.

Dean – Deanna – had sat in the Queen’s throne at those times, though she was underage, playing the
role that would have been her mother’s place, had Queen Mary not died.

Castiel shuddered.

“Castiel?” Dean asked worriedly.

“What, your High…Dean?”

“I said…” He sighed. “Never mind.”

“No, please,” said Castiel, even as he looked through Dean, trying to make out what was running up
the trunk of a tree behind him with a scritch-scritch-scritch of claws on bark. There was a burst of
movement overhead, and a squirrel launched itself at…it was another squirrel on the tree, and now
the two were fighting. Castiel breathed another sigh of relief, but the anxious pain in his chest
intensified.

Dean opened his mouth, closed it again, his lips set in an unhappy frown. Scowling, Dean
encouraged his horse to pick up her pace, catching up and overtaking Castiel. Tension bound Dean’s
shoulders, and Castiel stared uncomprehendingly after the boy.

“Stop it,” he snapped. “I don’t have time for you to throw a hissy fit because I’m not pandering to
you, Princ – Dean.”

With a gasp, Dean jerked his reins and his horse nickered and walked a few more steps before
stopping. “How dare you?” Dean cried, passion ablaze on his face as he turned to Castiel. Startled
by the vehemence in his voice, Castiel drew rein too, but his ill-trained horse didn’t stop. He added *acquire mounts that aren’t garbage* to his endless mental list of things he needed to keep track of.

“Dammit, you will *listen* to me Castiel!”

“When you have something to say worth hearing,” countered Castiel tightly.

“So this morning was just another lie?”

The horse finally stopped.

“What are you *talking* about?” Castiel demanded, exasperated. “*I’m* the one flip-flopping? In the course of one conversation you accused me of fabricating this entire scenario, claimed you trusted me, and then forced me to admit to affections that I’ve never owned having for *anyone*, but clearly I’m the liar. Of course.” His voice rang through the forest and the sounds of the animals around them went dead as they realized that humans rode in their midst. *After all that care, anyone within a mile now knows exactly where we are. Fantastic.* “We can talk about this later.”

“Now, Castiel! Through all of this I have relied on the fact that you don’t treat me like an *object*, not like my father, not like the servants, not like everyone else who has surrounded me my entire life,” said Dean, words spilling out desperately. “Since we left Ilchester you just…stopped! Suddenly I’m not a person anymore to you. And then today has been even worse! We’ve ridden in virtual silence for *three days* and you tell me nothing! I want to *help*, Castiel, and instead what I get from you is suspicion and *more* cruel words! Am I supposed to believe that *this* is love? This…this over-protectiveness, this random, unasked for maliciousness, this need to have every kind word dragged from you as if by torture when I merely asked *what do you think*? At least my father *truly* loved me! I’d be better off alone!”

“No!” Panic broke through Castiel’s apprehension, the word burst from him before he could stop it. Reason took over a moment later. “If that’s truly what you want,” he said, quelling every emotion. “I will take you to your father, or let you go your own way.”

“That’s *not* what I want! I want to trust you! I want to be with you! I want to *love* you! But you won’t let me! Again and again, even after you say you won’t push me away, you do!”

“I told you earlier,” Castiel grated out. “Dean. *Everyone. I. Love. Dies.* What did you *hear* when I said that? It’s not a euphemism. It is the literal, absolute truth. In the course of a lifetime everyone I’ve loved has abandoned me or been killed, some by my own hand, or like enough as makes no difference. I *can’t* lose you.”

“You will lose me,” he replied steadily, “if you can’t find a way to balance your affection and your protectiveness. And you’ll lose me if you can’t find a way to channel your anxiety that doesn’t involve lashing out at me when I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” murmured Castiel.

“You’re always sorry afterwards,” said Dean. “If you think that heals how much it hurts when you say unkind things to me, you’re sorely mistaken, especially since you belie the apology and compound the error when you subsequently lash out again and again.”

*It’s fine if he hates me, as long as he’s alive and safe.*

“I am who I am,” Castiel said steadily. “My job is to protect you.”

“No,” said Dean just as steadily, staring Castiel down. “*Your job* was to protect me, and escort me, and you were paid to *care*, as you so snidely told me when we began this journey. Your job was to
see me safe in Ilchester, to bring me to Alastair, and then deliver me gift-wrapped to Vermilion. That
job is now complete. You quit, and I’m glad you did. No one is paying you now. You either care
because you care, or you don’t care.”

“What makes you think I don’t care?”

“Let me list the ways,” Dean said wryly, rolling his eyes.

“You want to bandy words with me when I’m literally afraid you will die,” Castiel snarled, unable to
keep his temper in check any longer. “This is why I wish I’d never been given this assignment.
You’re a child, Dean. A sweet, loving, naïve child. It’s one of the beautiful things about you but it’s
infuriating, too! I think intellectually you understand the dangers surrounding us but on an emotional
level they mean nothing to you. I—”

“I lost my mother when I was four,” interrupted Dean quietly. “Over the years that followed my
father sent away every single person who I grew close to, every friend, every trusted servant.
Haven’t you wondered why I ultimately decided to trust you over him? It’s because he isolated me,
sheltered me, made me into the…the person…I am today. Of everyone he could have sent with me
to Vermilion he chose you. I don’t know what he was thinking, what he was expecting. I’m sure he
wasn’t thinking that we’d interact sexually, and I’m positive he wasn’t expecting that you’d grow to
care about me, but I’m equally positive why he selected you. You are paid to care, and you are used
to thinking only of yourself. In so many little ways, you are so much like him it terrifies me.”

“I am not—”

“No one knows my father better than I, and trust me, you are.” Dean refused to let Castiel get a word
in edgewise. He stomach twisted to know that’s what Dean thought of him. This morning, I told him
I loved him, and here’s his reply: he doesn’t trust me, barely tolerates me, and resents the aid I’m
offering freely. Remind me again why I’m putting up with this shit? Remind me again why I’m
allowing this boy to act like he knows me, act like he understands me, act like he matters to me?
“I am not a hot-house flower to be shielded and protected from every vagary of the weather. I’m
rootless. I’m free. I will not be held down, held back, by my father or my brother or my betrothed or
by you, no matter that you think and claim you love me. Either help me, or get out of my way.”

“I am helping you!” Castiel shouted. His voice rang through the empty forest and his stomach sank.
Like lighting bonfires at night for all to see.

“You are swaddling me,” Dean corrected, calm and in control. “You give me what choices you want
and then leave me out of every other decision. Where are we going, Castiel? Why this direction?
Who do you fear is chasing us, and why? Why are we avoiding all people? How are we to convert
our gems to usable currency?”

“I’ve answered some of those questions,” he replied, disgusted by the sullen note in his voice.

Didn’t you say Dean was a Goddess? Didn’t you say you would follow him anywhere? Didn’t you
say you wouldn’t underestimate him?

But I have to protect him. I can’t let those who chase us hurt him.

“When it’s suited you,” Dean conceded, “or when I’ve pushed you. My point is, we are either in this
together, or we will part ways and I will finally take personal control of my fate. I’m tired of others
making my choices for me. I’m free, and I intend to pursue that freedom wherever it takes me. I’d
rather you go with me. You care for me, and I care for you, and without your expertise and
experience my chances of maintaining my freedom are slim.”
“So beautiful. So brilliant. So untameable.”

“In the end, you’re as opportunistic as the rest of us,” said Castiel, sighing.

“I learned from the best.” Dean smiled wryly.

_Either tell her or let her go._

“We’re going to the forest where you were led astray by the will-o-the-wisp,” Castiel said. “I think you will be safe there. Unless you’d prefer to go someplace else. We’re avoiding people because we need to disappear. When we…”

And he told Dean everything. Not about his own past – that was his to share or not, not Deans to demand – but about his plans and his thoughts and his expectations. They talked as they resumed their journey down the side of the ridge, talked as the horses splashed through the shallow waters of the stream that cut across the valley, talked as the tired mounts laboriously ascended the opposite rise, talked until the sun went down. Dean was, as ever, magnificent, asking astute questions, pointing out weaknesses in Castiel’s reasoning, voracious in his desire to know, to understand, to contribute. When they finally settled down for the night and Castiel removed his sword, Dean hesitantly took the blade up, looked a question at Castiel, and waited, and despite all his instincts to the contrary Castiel explained the basics of swordcraft. By the time they grew too exhausted to continue, Dean’s cheeks were ruddy and excited, eyes bright in the white-gray light of the moon, and though Castiel battled within himself, he knew that Dean was right. Dean was capable of making these choices. Dean was capable of learning enough to protect himself. Dean was capable of managing his survival without Castiel.

_But if he doesn’t need me, why should he keep me around?_

Crowley and Roman had, for no reason Castiel had ever been able to fathom, considered Castiel valuable – considered him more valuable than those they hurt and killed as they solidified their hold on him. They considered him valuable enough that they pursued him when he left, pursued him still. Castiel always assumed it was because he was an excellent fighter, a willing accomplice, a cynical assessor of any situation, a valuable tool.

Castiel was a _thing_ to them.

He assumed he was a _thing_ to Dean.

Yet what had the boy said? Dean was tired of being treated like an object. He appreciated that Castiel treated him like a person, and resented the times when Castiel failed to do so. As Dean, to Castiel’s shock, crawled into the bed roll alongside Castiel, curled up contentedly against his warmth, and fell quickly into a deep sleep, Castiel wondered what he truly meant – to Dean, to Crowley, to Roman, to King John, to himself.

The astounding possibility that he might have value independent of his ability to be useful to those around him had never dawned on him before.

Thinking of the things Dean had said to him, the way the boy had twisted him around, infuriated him, confused him, and repeatedly forced him to concede, to relent, to expose himself emotionally and even physically, he had to wonder whether he had independent value to Dean or not. Dean himself had conceded that without Castiel his chances of success were nil. Dean knew that Castiel loved him. It wouldn’t be the first time, or the tenth time, that Castiel had seen someone young and ambitious bewitch an older person and twist them around until they didn’t know which way was up. Maybe, once again, he was reading the situation wrong. Maybe Dean was manipulative, abusive,
maybe he’d known exactly what he was doing when he asked for Castiel’s help that first time, maybe he’d never been abused.

Dean murmured something unintelligible but unmistakably tender in his sleep.

Tears stung Castiel’s eyes.

Even if he was right – even if Dean was using him – Castiel didn’t care anymore. He wanted his Goddess, wanted to be what his Goddess needed him to be, and if that meant sacrificing himself on Dean’s altar, then at least Castiel would do one thing in his life that he was proud of.

He hoped he wasn’t wrong about Dean. He hoped his Goddess was as beautiful, inside and out, as he’d always seemed to be.

“Those are all good reasons to avoid the crossroads towns,” Dean replied thoughtfully after Castiel explained his thinking as they skirted around a steep ravine. “But there are things we need, things we can only get from other people. I wouldn’t mind a pair of shoes, for example.” He wiggled his toes against the improvised stirrups of his saddle to emphasize the point.

“We shouldn’t—” Castiel broke off as Dean quirked an expressive eyebrow at him. He repressed the urge to grind his teeth in frustration. Instead, he asked, “What do you suggest instead?”

“I go into town.”

“But—”

“You’re right,” Castiel admitted begrudgingly. Beaming, Dean thrust a triumphant fist into the air. “We can brainstorm a shopping list and you can go into the next crossroads village and see what you can get.”

“Thank you, Castiel,” said Dean.

They rode in silence for a time. Castiel would give a lot to have some kind of magic to help him understand Dean’s erratic moods. Given everything the boy had experienced in the past few weeks, it made sense that he ran hot and cold, but Castiel had never been great at understanding the subtext of how people around him behaved. The woods on this slope were thin, ground thick with undergrowth, holes torn in the canopy where trees had fallen and taken others with them. Occasionally, fire-blackened stumps stuck up from the undergrowth.

“Do you know what happened here?” Dean asked.

“What makes you think something happened here?” Castiel countered. Dean shot him a frustrated moue. *Maybe I’m not the only one who struggles to read the intent of the other.* “Tell me what you observe that makes you think so.”

“Oh! I thought you meant…” Dean shook his head, shaggy, raggedly cut hair swaying about his ears
and dusting dirty blond strands over his eyes. He let go the reins to sweep them aside and the mare stumbled. “The stumps, obviously. So many burned suggest that the forest caught fire, yet some of the trees around us are big, which means they’re old, right? But then there’s all the fallen trees, and the undergrowth, which I thought were associated with younger forests? It’s weird, right?”

“It is,” said Castiel, smiling. *He’s a natural. At everything.* “I don’t know what happened here, but I agree that something unusual surely did. My guess would be it has something to do with the dragons that rake the ridgelines to trim their claws.”

“Do you think we might see a dragon?” Dean asked eagerly.

“They live in the mountains on the northern border of Vermilion,” Castiel explained. “It’s much colder there than here; they hibernate through the winter.”

“Have you been to Vermilion?” Dean glanced north, though there was nothing to see but more scattered tree trunks, a field of brown punctuated by green leaves and red berries and the occasional brilliant flower. A stray thought struck Castiel, the sort he usually ignored, but he determined to do better – to learn to trust Dean, to demonstrate the affection that Dean deserved from him, to give Dean a chance to prove himself – so as he answered, he steered his nag to a blooming honeysuckle.

“I haven’t,” Castiel said, plucking a flower as he rode by. He heeled the horse toward Dean, but produced no actual change in the horse’s speed or trajectory. “There is history between Vermilion and Bootbock – as I understand it, the royal family of Vermilion took a sizeable loan from Crowley when Crowley was first getting started in business, but Vermilion refused to pay what they owed, so Crowley seized their collateral, and Vermilion closed their borders to Bootbock’s traders, and it’s been a mess since I was a child.”

“But weren’t you fleeing from Bootbock and Crowley? Wouldn’t that have made Vermilion a good choice for you? The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?”

That philosophy was what had brought Castiel to Roman, and he’d learned the hard way that “the enemy of his enemy” would rather use him to get back at their mutual enemy than be Castiel’s friend. Castiel shrugged.

“Why take the risk?”

“You were willing to take it to escort me there…?”

“I was under orders from the King, and as we’ve established, he paid me well to do his bidding.” Finally, Castiel steered his horse until it walked alongside Dean’s. Dean smiled at him, then broke into wide-eyed surprise as Castiel leaned across the distance between them and placed the flower in the crook of Dean’s ear. Bright red, it made a beautiful contrast to his brown hair, brought out the rosy flush of his cheeks and the lovely pink of his lips. “But I’ve learned, much to my shock, that some things are worth more than money, worth more than my own self-interest.”

“Sir Knight…” Dean breathed.

“Crowley would be so disappointed if he knew.” Castiel spoke flippantly, but it did little to dull the real pain behind his words. “He…worked…very hard to instill certain…ethics…in me, over the course of nearly 20 years, and you’ve demolished the fruits of his labor in little over a month. You’re remarkable, Dean.”

“Nothing you say or do will ever convince me that, underneath your façade, you’re not a good man,” Dean declared.
If you only knew…

…but what if that’s true? What if I really could tell you everything, the entire truth? And you could still forgive me, still care for me, still somehow believe I’m good?

That wouldn’t make me good.

It might make you bad.

I have no idea what to do with that.

But I think that kind of acceptance would feel... good.

Castiel could find no answer to Dean’s earnest words, so he heeled his horse to a slightly less lethargic walk and led them through the forest. A booming crash of wood on wood off to their left drew his attention, but it proved to only be an oblivious bear, clawing at the bark of a dead tree and causing it to fall. The bear ignored them, and Castiel ignored the bear, though Dean stared at it fearfully.

“You said you trusted me,” said Castiel abruptly in the comparative silence that followed.

“I do,” Dean agreed. Castiel wanted to glance back and see the sincere expression that must accompany those truly sincere words, but he resisted.

“You don’t act like you trust me.”

Am I just pushing him away again? After we’d finally managed to have a conversation that didn’t devolve into an argument?

“Or rather, sometimes you do – like just now – but other times…” Castiel shook his head and refused to look back to see Dean’s reaction.

There was a long, unpleasant pause.

“What do you mean?” Dean asked at length.

“You…” Castiel trailed off, struggling to put into words what he’d observed. “You question me. You argue. You push back. You don’t accept my judgement, don’t trust my experience. You always want to know why. But then when I tell you, sometimes you throw it in my face, like when I told you I wanted to protect you.”

“You think trust means blind obedience?” Dean sounded baffled and shocked.

“It doesn’t?” Castiel replied, unthinking.

“Do you trust me, Castiel?”

“Of course I do, Crowley, sir.”

“More than you do Gabriel?”

No, was Castiel’s immediate thought, except... Gabriel had led him astray. Gabriel had lied to him. Gabriel had tried to steal him from his home on the nebulous promise of something better, had promised Castiel answers only at some unknown time in the future when they were safe, whatever that meant.
Castiel was safe with Crowley. Bootbock was the only home he’d ever known. Gabriel’s “other place” was a pipedream, a pretty lie that Castiel had believed when he was little. Now he was ten years old, and had no place in his life for frivolities.

Frivolities were all that Gabriel seemed to have time for.

“Yes sir, I trust you.”

The cruel twist of Crowley’s lips planted the first seeds of doubt in Castiel’s mind.

Castiel came back to the moment to find Dean riding beside him, an intense expression on his youthful face as he gazed at Castiel.

“Someone hurt you very badly, didn’t they?” Dean asked quietly.

Yes. I did. I’m at the root of the evil that’s befallen myself and those I care about.

“Castiel, trust means…” Dean fished for words, waving a hand meaninglessly in the air over his horse’s haunches. “It means I believe the things you say to me, and have faith that you have my best interest at heart. It means I give you the benefit of the doubt, and that, if something you told me conflicted with the word of someone I didn’t trust, I would believe you before them. But it doesn’t mean I give unlimited credence to everything you say, and it doesn’t mean I’ll never disagree.”

Castiel tore his gaze away. Looking at Dean and hearing the words of his long-dead older brother was agony.

This is why I never let myself think about those days.

I wish Dean would stop asking.

Bullshit. If I really wanted him to stop, I could tell him to in terms he’d have to listen to. I could put him down, tell him to drop it, push him away.

Or maybe I am pushing him away by talking about it. No matter what he says, when he knows the things I’ve done…

“I killed my brother,” Castiel blurted.

I can’t do this anymore.

“Casti—”

“No, listen, please,” implored Castiel. “You shouldn’t trust me. I’m not safe. I betrayed my brother to Crowley for the crime of trying to take me to a better life, and I didn’t regret it until I realized that Crowley intended to kill him instead of merely torturing him for his infraction. There were others, too. Being my friend is…was…a death sentence. Crowley stabbed Meg in the stomach after she tried to shield me. I killed Anna myself; Crowley encouraged me to hold the knife and praised me when I was done. Balthazar challenged me to a duel after that, of all the preposterous things, as if honor had any place in Bootbock, any place in our lives, and at least I had the mercy to kill him cleanly, which is more than I can say for Samandriel. I don’t even know why Samandriel had to die, but Crowley told me to do it, so…I did. Because nothing was more important than my trust and loyalty to Crowley. And none of that…none of that was why I left.”

Dear Castiel.

“I left because Roman made me a better offer.”
I don’t know if you’ll ever see this letter.

“Roman told me he trusted me, but more, he told me he loved me.”

I wanted you to know that I don’t blame you.

“For that, I left Crowley.”

You’re so young.

“But Roman was no better.”

You don’t remember home at all, and I never told you because I didn’t want you to regret everything you’d never have.

“The only difference between Crowley and Roman was that Roman hurt people I’d never met, instead of people I cared about.”

If I’d realized the extent to which Crowley had influenced you, I’d have done differently.

“It was easier at first.”

It’s too late now.

“I didn’t care, at first.”

You don’t seem to realize that he’s going to kill me, and I haven’t the heart to tell you so.

“But over the years whenever someone suffered all I could see was those who had trusted me and I’d betrayed.”

Don’t cry, baby bro.

“All I could see was Gabriel.”

You should know: Crowley gave me a choice.

“And I still didn’t leave until Roman betrayed me.”

Me or you.

“Dozens – hundreds of times I could have stood up and tried to stop injustice, and instead I did nothing.”

He was crazy to think that was any kind of choice.

“Even now, I’ve killed in your father’s name, I’ve killed in your name, and I’ve not felt guilt or remorse.”

I love you, Cassie.

“I’ve felt nothing.”

Always your brother—

“I felt nothing until I started traveling with you, Dean.”
Gabriel.

“Cas…”

They’d stopped riding at some point, horses stomping impatiently in a deep patch of shade, ground festooned with clusters of white-capped toadstools. It took all of Castiel’s willpower to return to the present, to tear his mind’s eye from memories of Gabriel screaming, of Gabriel dying, of years later finding the letter Gabriel had written him. Crowley took the letter from him and destroyed it, but not before Castiel had committed every word to memory. Reading Gabriel’s last words after years of silent self-condemnation was the closest Castiel had ever felt to forgiveness.

Until now.

Dean didn’t look disgusted. Dean didn’t look judgmental. Dean looked horrified, but sympathetic. The pain that twisted his features was on Castiel’s behalf, the tears in his eyes a mirror of the ones skimming down Castiel’s cheeks. Dean reached out and flicked a bead of moisture from beneath Castiel’s eye, and Castiel gasped at the heat of Dean’s hand on his clammy skin.

“It hurts,” Castiel whispered, forcing himself to look into Dean’s expressive eyes. All he saw there… was an emotion he didn’t have a name for, didn’t dare assign a name to, but he’d seen it before. Though the shades differed, those could have been Meg’s eyes, could have been Anna’s eyes, could have been Gabriel’s eyes, meeting his with trust and affection and something more, something unknowable and untouchable and unnamable. Something impossible, something that someone like Castiel could never earn, never deserve. He wanted to beg Dean to stop looking at him as if the phantoms of the dead hid behind his gaze. He wanted to beg Dean to hold him and never let him go.

I called him a child, but he’s wiser than I. Somehow, after everything he went through, his father didn’t rob him of his dignity, his pride, his kindness, his compassion. Crowley broke me, but John didn’t break Dean.

“I know it does.” Sympathetic tears rolled down Dean’s cheeks and Castiel thought his heart might break.

I’ve caused him pain. I never want to cause him pain. I never want a single drop of rain to fall on the perfect sunshine of Dean’s countenance.

Did I really just think that? Did I really just think that?

“I don’t know who I am anymore,” Castiel whispered.

“That makes two of us,” confessed Dean, “but I know one thing, and it’s keeping me going.”

“What’s that?”

“I love you, Castiel. My Knight.”

They didn’t make journey farther that night. They dismounted and set up camp in the damp, sheltered glade, made a meal of fresh mushrooms as Castiel pointed out which were edible and which poisonous, and curled up in the cradling softness of a bed of pine needles caught between two large tree roots. With soft touches and tender words, they comforted each other, and Castiel mourned as he’d never permitted himself to before.

This is so unfair to him. Dean has lost so much, yet here he is, supporting me.

But he doesn’t seem to mind. If our positions were reversed, I wouldn’t mind either.
Perhaps…that’s what love is. That’s what trust is.

Desperate, Castiel clung to Dean, his anchor, his sanctuary after so long alone and painfully isolated. Feelings inundated him, and though part of him struggled against them, he did his best to surrender, tried to let pain and grief flood in, tried to let gratitude and love cast light into the shadowed places where Castiel had hidden his sins for far too long.

“I love you,” he whispered over and over, until the words ceased to mean anything, until Dean smiled and answered each invocation with a tender kiss.

That night, it was Castiel who lay cradled in Dean’s arms, Castiel who fell asleep comforted, safe, and secure.

Wherever they went, however long they had together, Castiel had found his home. He’d never leave Dean.

Birdsong filled the air as Castiel blinked awake. The morning was warm, for a change, a reminder that while they’d been journeying mild winter had transitioned to early spring. The blanket had fallen off them in the night without waking them, and Dean was tucked against Castiel’s side, his feet buried between Castiel’s legs for warmth. A possessive arm was wrapped around Castiel’s middle, tight yet gentle where Dean’s fingers cupped Castiel’s side. One of Castiel’s arms was asleep, pins and needles tingling through the flesh trapped between Dean’s back and the roots of the tree that sheltered them. Dean murmured and shifted enough to let Castiel move, morning dew beading in his hair and glittering in his eyelashes like jewels.

“Te’mo’min’s,” Dean mumbled.

Captivated, Castiel brought their lips together, warm and tender. Their noses brushed, the tip of Dean’s a cold contrast to the heat of their joined mouths, and Dean giggled and twisted in Castiel’s arms.

“The most precious…” Castiel whispered against Dean’s mouth, running a hand down his side. “…beautiful…” Dean shifted onto his back, tugged Castiel over him, and licked eagerly at Castiel’s lips. “…brilliant…” Rucking up Dean’s shirt, Castiel’s chilled hand pressed against Dean’s warm flesh and Dean gasped, eyes flying open, mouth dropping with shock. “…precocious…” Their eyes met, Dean’s brilliant green flecked with gold in the morning dim, and Castiel was pierced through. “…breath-taking…” Castiel’s hands squeezed between Dean’s ass and the ground, encouraging the boy up, encouraging their hips together, and Dean obligingly wrapped his legs around Castiel’s and rutted up from the ground. “…compassionate…” Their cocks, just beginning to harden, rubbed together and Dean breathed a sigh that misted about his face and arched his back against the tree root, leveraging himself to grind their crotches together more firmly. “…perfect…”

“‘m not,” Dean whispered. His hips hitched minutely against Castiel again and again, rubbing cock against cock, the cloth of their pants a scant barrier to the pleasure that built hot in Castiel’s veins. “‘m not perfect. Don’t ask that of me. I can’t live up to that.”

“You don’t have to,” Castiel kissed the words into Dean’s neck, raked his nails over the sensitive skin of Dean’s chest. His finger skimmed over the scabbed cut across Dean’s breast and the boy flinched beneath him, only to melt into languid ease as Castiel teased his nipple to a taut nub. “This is perfect. Every imperfection makes you who you are.” He licked a line to Dean’s ear, nibbled at the delicate lobe, savored Dean’s whimper and the hardness of Dean’s cock as it pressed insistently into
Castiel’s thigh. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Castiel…!”

“Be yourself,” Castiel insisted, sucking a line of kisses down Dean’s fuzzy chin. “However you want to be – however you want to change – I will follow your lead.” Adjusting his hips, Castiel pressed his cock against Dean’s ass, part of him screaming to tear away the barrier of their clothing and sink himself in Dean’s heat for the first time.

“Oh,” Dean exclaimed, drawing a second “Ohhhh…” out in a long moan. “We could…you would…even though I’m…?”

“You’re what, Dean?” whispered Castiel. “You’re perfect? Just like this?”

“Please…” Dean emphasized his plea by rocking back against Castiel’s cock, as he had so often rocked back against Castiel’s fingers, and Castiel grunted pleasure against Dean’s lips. With fevered movements, Dean rutted his hips up against Castiel’s belly, urged Castiel on with his legs, unsuccessfully sought a handhold on the smooth skin of Castiel’s back. He hissed as Dean’s fingers found his knife wound, realized that their movements were probably aggravating Dean’s injuries, and slowed. Dean whimpered in disappointment.

“Am I hurting you?” Castiel asked. Dean opened dark, unfocused eyes and shook his head. His cheeks were deliciously flushed, his lips kiss-swollen red.

“Hurts less than riding does.” The words slurred together and Dean painted sloppy kisses over every part of Castiel’s face he could reach – Castiel’s nose, his cheek, his forehead, one even got him on the eye. “Please, Cas…”

“What do you want?”

Dean shuddered. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Call me…call me by my name…”

“Dean…”

“No!”

Finally understanding, Castiel bit a hard kiss into the sensitive flesh behind Dean’s – Deanna’s – ear, and growled “Deanna.” She moaned and curled her ass against his cock more firmly.

“Please…!”

“Do you want me to drain you, my Princess?”

“Yes!” she cried. “Am I…may I…is that…?”

“However you are is perfect,” Castiel huffed, voice deep and husky in her ear. “Whatever you want me to call you – however you want me to pleasure you – even if you switch every day, every hour…” Castiel slipped two fingers into his mouth, coated them in saliva, and slid his hand into Deanna’s pants. When the pad of one of his fingers brushed her tight, puckered hole, she bucked against him and burst out a sound somewhere between a squeal and a howl, with a hint of a pl sound that made Castiel think she was trying and failing to beg. “Whoever you are comfortable being is fine
with me, so long as it is fine with you.” Castiel slipped a finger into her easily despite the awkward angle, rocking her back against the tree root to raise her hips higher and facilitate his access. Twisting, twisting, he found the tight nub of sensitive nerves within her and flicked a nail over it.

With a jerk that dragged Deanna’s cock over Castiel’s belly and a hitched, destroyed noise, Deanna came.

“Perfect, Deanna,” Castiel breathed, pressing a second finger into her body despite her squirming attempts to dodge. She moaned, pitiful and sweet, as he continued to stimulate her, her legs wrapped loosely around him, her head lolling to the side. Finding the perfect spot, Castiel thrust with his hips, thrust his cock against her perineum, her balls, her rim, with short, ragged bursts of movement. Her thighs tightened around him, applying pressure along his length to match the pressure that rutting against her put on the sensitive head of his cock, and the fabric that separated flesh from flesh abraded him, texture a tantalizing counterpoint that mimicked the touch of fingers. Mimicking the rolling of his hips, Castiel massaged her channel and she moaned and thrashed around him, beneath him. Her ass clenched around his fingers as if to force him out, but her hips pushed down against his hand, begging silently for him to continue.

“Love…love you…” she gasped out. “My Knight…”

“May I call you Princess?” he grated, squeezing his eyes shut against her neck.

“Yes!”

“Princess…beautiful Princess…”

Heat built to a fever pitch in his head. He could imagine that the heat around his fingers was around his cock, imagine that her tight rim compressed his sensitive length, imagine the friction of her enclosing him, imagine the sounds she’d make as he fucked her, and it was glorious. Panting, shoving his hips against her so hard that her body shimmied by inches up the root, Castiel chased ecstasy between his Goddess’ legs.

Delicate fingers threaded through his hair, Deanna’s hips ground down against his hand, against his cock, and her voice, low and sultry, whispered, “Come for me, my Castiel.”

The world whited out.

No more than moments could have passed before Castiel came back to himself, panting desperately for air, rutting against her, every press of his cock against her hard, hot flesh jolting him with pleasure. She moaned, rim fluttering against his fingers, a pleading hitch caught in her throat, and as he ground to a halt he worked his fingers within her until she went suddenly tense and then lax against him, sighing out a second climax. Her hand pet his head soothingly, swiped damp locks and sweat from his brow, and she chuckled.

“Good?” Castiel asked.

“Wonderful,” Deanna agreed, “but you’re heavy, and this root is digging into my back.”

Laughing, overwhelmed with pleasure and emotion, Castiel caught her in his arms and pulled her into a more comfortable position on his lap.

“Ten more minutes?” she said hopefully.

“Ten more minutes,” Castiel conceded.
Twenty minutes later she had her hand wrapped around his cock, her lips pressed to his ear as she whispered promises in his ear so dirty that he couldn’t believe they’d come from a girl – boy? – he’d once considered chaste.

“Wanna feel your…your cock…inside me, want to make you feel so good…it makes me so hot that you want me…get your fingers back in my…my ass, my Knight, my good Knight, my sweet Castiel…”

Of all things, it was the praise that did him in. No one called him good. No one called him sweet. But Deanna knew who he was, knew what he was, and she said that about him anyway. It wasn’t true – surely neither of them could believe it was true – but when Deanna whispered it while her awkward fingers slowly grew proficient at stroking him to bliss, Castiel wanted to believe it.

“I’m not good,” he groaned as she teased a pinky between his shaft and his foreskin, her hips rolling against his fingers buried deep inside her.

“You’re good in the same way that I’m perfect,” she whispered in his ear. “You’re good for me, aren’t you? If I gave you an order, if I told you to do something, if I commanded you to kill for me…” Castiel gasped at the viciousness in her voice, gasped at the sharp nail she flicked roughly over his slit, gasped at the tight clench of her ass against his hand. “…if I ordered you to come right now…”

And, Gods shelter him, he did.

Chapter End Notes

Remember we’re now posting bi-weekly. Next chapter will post on Wednesday, February 22nd.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She...he...must be alright.

Castiel’s hand clenched on the hilt of his sword as he reached the end of the clearing, turned on a heel, and paced back the other way.

He’s not late yet...it’s a long trip into the village, and who knows how long it might take him to negotiate for the goods we’re buying, or even find them?

Over the past hours, Castiel had worn the grass flat while the knackered horses watched him, eyes rolling at the human so foolish that he walked when he didn’t have to.

What if he’s been set upon? What if someone recognized him? What if there were soldiers? What if he’s been robbed? Has he ever bought something from a common shop before? Why did I let him convince me this was a good idea?

A woman screamed somewhere deep in the forest and Castiel’s hand was on his sword and his feet dashing towards the sound before his brain caught up with reality. It was only a wild cat’s call, not a woman. There were no people in that direction anyway, and—

“Castiel?”

Twisting around so quickly that his knee spasmed and his side ached, Castiel aimed his blade at the sound, startling Dean so badly that the boy jumped back. The sight of him was a balm to Castiel’s racing heart, as calming as a soothing touch to his skin.

“Is everything alright?” Dean asked, raising a wary hand. Huffing a sigh of relief, Castiel sheathed his blade.

“Yes, everything is...” Castiel trailed off. Dean looked hale and hearty but his face was lined red as if he’d been crying. “Is everything alright?”

“Excellent,” said Dean with false brightness, holding up a cloth sack that jangled with every movement. Castiel had been so distracted by a puma that he’d somehow failed to hear that when Dean was approaching.

Stupid overwrought fool...going to get him, get both of us, killed...

Silently, Castiel closed the distance between them and cupped Dean’s cheek. The boy grimaced and rubbed into the contact, tears pooling in his eyes once more.

“I got what food I could, and some pre-made clothing I think will fit, and a pair of boots that are only slightly used,” Dean explained, maintaining his veneer of cheer. “Razors, soap, twine – they had an excellent general store at the crossroads, stocked with everything the merchants might need. They had some things that weren’t on our list. I considered getting candles – they seemed a silly indulgence, no matter how tempting – but I bought some metal fishing hooks. I thought maybe you could teach me how to fish? If you know how?”

“Bootbock is a city of canals, of course I know how to fish,” snorted Castiel derisively. “Everyone
“Well, I’m sorry I’m not worldly enough to know what everyone in Bootbock does,” Dean snapped, jerking away from Castiel’s hand. “And that my education didn’t include fishing but—” His eyes were rimmed with tears, bloodshot, his cheeks flushed, but he wouldn’t meet Castiel’s gaze.

“Woah,” said Castiel, surprised by Dean’s vehemence. “I didn’t mean…sorry if I sounded like I was denigrating you. I’d be happy to teach you to fish. What happened to you in the village?”

“Nothing,” Dean pouted. “What makes you think…” Trailing off, Dean shyly glanced up, met Castiel’s stern gaze, and sighed. “Nothing happened,” he repeated, sounding defeated. “They called me boy, asked my name, used it. They led me straight past the well-made dresses to the men’s tunics and breeches, offered me boots despite there being several lovely pairs of slippers, and I had to smile and nod and act like I was unaffected, act like I was normal. I thought it would be better if I went in looking like this…”

“It was.” Castiel tried to sound reassuring. “No one recognized you, right? No one threatened you?”

“No, and you were right to be worried,” conceded Dean. “There were soldiers from Lawrence stationed at the crossroads. They examined everyone who went by, asked for us by name, and inquired of every traveler if they had seen us. They even had likenesses of us to show off. I recognized one of the soldiers; he used to bring me flowers sometimes, said he liked to make me smile. I thought he was cute.” He shook his head. “I mean…but he didn’t look at me twice. After all,” he concluded bitterly, “they were looking for a beautiful, long-haired princess, not a scruffy boy.”

“A beautiful young man,” amended Castiel, running a finger over the fuzz on Dean’s chin. Dean scowled but didn’t pull away again. “Who is safe because he chose to appear like this before the public.”

“I don’t like this,” Dean muttered. “I’m not a…except I am…but my…my penis…flops between my legs, and when it’s cold, like, hurts, and the guard met my eye and I started to get hard right there in public and the people in town looked at me differently. It was better in a way; it seemed like men saw me and none of the wagon guards shouted anything unseemly, but they only thought they saw me, this isn’t who I am…” He sighed explosively, dropped the bag and flopped forward into Castiel’s arms. “Just…tell me…tell me I’m not…” He pressed his damp cheeks against Castiel’s chest. “I’m not crazy, am I? That I still think I’m a…that I still think I’m Deanna?”

“You are still Deanna,” Castiel replied. “Your experiences have changed your life – but they haven’t fundamentally altered who you are. When you were…dressing like Deanna, acting like Deanna, you were being yourself and that you had a dick was…almost incidental? I fear I’m not expressing myself well.”

Dean shook his head, grinding his nose against Castiel’s clavicle, but Castiel couldn’t guess his meaning.

“Would you call me Deanna for the rest of the day?” she whispered.

“I’ll call you whatever you want, Deanna,” Castiel agreed. “My beautiful young woman. And if you’ll pull the razor and the soap from the bag of supplies, I’ll teach you how to shave.”

Castiel took a seat amidst the soft grass, spread his legs wide and, with a gesture, invited Deanna to sit between them. She quirked an eyebrow at him but didn’t question the suggestion. Dropping the bag she carried, she dug within and pulled out the supplies, then walked over and settled cross
legged between his legs, shimmying her ass against his cock. Her dick made a bulge at the crotch of her pants, and she laid her head back against his shoulder.

“Like this?” she whispered in his ear, throaty, hoarse. Castiel swallowed, his cock thickening, and she twisted and brushed a kiss against his bobbing Adam’s apple. Unable to find words to reply, Castiel nodded and took the soap and razor from her. Wrapping his arms around her, Castiel spat in his hand and worked up a lather then set the soap aside. She made a disgusted sound when he shifted his hand toward her face and Castiel rolled his eyes.

“You’ve swallowed my release,” Castiel pointed out.

“When you put it that way,” she grumbled, and shifted her head to the side, offering Castiel her cheek. Her loose tunic slid from her shoulder and exposed the long, delicate line of her neck and the shapely curve of her shoulder blade.

*She trusts me this much. After how we’ve fought, after how I’ve abused her trust time and time again, she still has enough faith in me to expose her neck to my hand while I’m holding a razor, to leave her physical care entirely to me.*

Blown away, Castiel coated her pale fuzz with lather, his hard cock wedged against her ass. The bulge in her pants swelled into a tent as he massaged her face, her eyes slipping shut, her lips parted to allow breathy, pleased noises to escape.

“Oh, you’ve got your face good and soapy,” Castiel breathed in her ear, “you are ready to carefully use the blade to shear away the hair.”

Deanna whimpered and shuddered as the chill razor ran over her cheek for the first time. A movement caught Castiel’s eye: the tent of her breeches had shifted. Castiel slowly closed his eyes and opened them again, forcing himself to calm self-control, quelling the faint tremble in his hands. She trusted him and, so help him, he would never hurt her again. Running the blade carefully over the curve of her chin, Castiel kept his eyes on Deanna’s crotch. Her cock bucked as the razor made a distinct *schick* over her skin, and a dot of wetness darkened the fabric.

“Have you touched yourself yet?” asked Castiel. Deanna started to nod, but Castiel snapped out a discouraging noise and jerked the razor away from her delicate skin. She froze.

“Oh, of course,” she whispered. “When I urinate, when I dress…”

“When you’re hard?” suggested Castiel. Deanna made a wounded noise and for a moment Castiel thought he’d cut her, but there was no tell-tale spread of brilliant red amidst the gray coating her skin.

“Take your cock out, Deanna.”

“Cas…”

“Come on,” he coaxed. With a shudder and a whimper, Deanna hesitantly tugged the ties on her pants loose, slipped a hand beneath the fabric and withdrew her dick. Small, it fit in her hand snugly, skin appearing deeply flushed compared to the paleness of her palm. Thin liquid shimmered around her slit. “How does that feel?”

“ Weird,” she breathed. Castiel ran the blade over her face again and wiped the excess soap off on his bared arm. Scabs from the wounds his would-be assassins had made flaked off. “It always feel strange when you…or when I…”

“Do you like it?” he asked. *Schick,* went the razor over her skin.
“I’m not sure,” said Deanna. *Schick.* “I—”

“Shh, it’s okay,” Castiel interrupted. *Schick.* “Do you want to stop?”

“No,” she breathed. “Tell me what to do.”

Heat spiked through Castiel, incandescent, at the desire and surrender in her voice. “Stroke yourself,” he said, voice growing guttural. He held the razor still in his trembling hand and stared as Deanna obeyed, clasping her cock in cupped fingers and rubbing down her length. A moan leaked from her and she collapsed back against Castiel, shaking. “Again.” Clenching the muscles in his arm, he firmed his grip on the razor and steadied himself. “Again.” Her fingers twitched and she tightened her grip, rubbing her foreskin over her sensitive cock head. “Again.” *Schick.* Shaving her was incredibly hard. Her throat bobbed around tiny, vocal gasps; her cheeks puffed and cratered with every breath, and tearing his gaze from her stroking hand was torture, but her reaction to the cool metal against her skin made it worth the risks, worth the challenge. “Again.”

“*Castiel…*I can’t…I—”

“*Again,*” he commanded, resisting the drive to rut his erection against her back. *Soon,* he promised himself. *Schick.* With a sob that dragged the blade over Deanna’s skin, she forced her hand to press along her length. Skin rubbed on skin with a dry noise, and Deanna twisted and buried her face in the crook of Castiel’s neck. He dropped the razor – he was almost finished anyway – and wrapped his arms around her shaking body. “Stop if you need to…”

“Can’t,” she moaned. “Can’t,” she repeated as she stroked herself again, “can’t…can’t…can’t…”

“Fuck,” groaned Castiel. Cradling her close to him, he slipped his other arm between him and palmed at his aching cock. “Yes you can, Princess—” She moaned. “Gotta learn to—”

“Stop!” she exclaimed. Castiel instantly stopped moving, held her protectively, and was shocked to see that she didn’t stop stroking herself. Instead, she groaned again and pumped her cock harder, harder.

“Deann—”

“I’ll take care of you, my Knight,” Deanna chuckled, nipping at his neck. Castiel’s arms tightened around her; her arm brushed his stomach and nudged his cock as she stroked herself vigorously. “Obedient, loyal, good, so good…all mine…all…” The word fractured around a cry and Deanna jerked in his arms, bit insensible sounds into his flesh. Castiel’s skin tingled; the merest brush of his clothing amplified to sight-dazzling intensity. He tried to force his eyes to focus, to see the come that must be leaking from Deanna’s cocks, but he couldn’t. His vision was filled with her face, his sensations overwhelmed by her hot and trembling against him. For endless moments, she slumped into chest, panting, and then she sucked a bruising kiss against his neck and slid her hand into his breeches. Her palm was wet – *her come, Gods, it’s covered in her come* – as she wrapped it around his cock.

“I know what this feels like now,” she breathed in his ear, squeezing. Light flared bright against his eyelids. He hadn’t realized he’d closed his eyes. “What it feels like to stroke…to flick at the slit…to toy with the foreskin…” Each word was matched by the action, and Castiel struggled to hold himself upright, to hold her, as pleasure assaulted his senses. “Thank you for always taking care of me. Thank you for protecting me. Thank you for believing in me, even when I don’t believe in myself. Thank you for knowing who I am.” Each breathy declaration was huffed humidly in Castiel’s ear as Deanna stroked him with a confidence she’d never had before. He tried to reply, tried to deny, tried to say anything, but only choked sounds of pleasure escaped his mouth. “Thank you for being the
man I thought you were – the man I knew you could be.”

With a guttural groan and a flash of incandescent heat, Castiel came. Pressing close to Deanna, he painted her fair skin with kisses, murmured wordless praise and affection along her chin. Soap smeared over his lips and fuzz snagged against his stubble.

“I missed a few spots,” he murmured.

“You’ll have to keep trying until you get it right,” Deanna replied. There was a pause that felt fraught, though Castiel had no idea why, and then Deanna said, “Um… I… I’m not actually sure I liked that. What I did. To myself. It felt good but… it was wrong, all wrong.”

“It’s alright,” Castiel reassured her, stroking down her back.

“Maybe someday, but—”

“Deanna,” he interrupted, drawing her away from him so that he could look into her expressive, lovely eyes. “No apology needed. If you didn’t enjoy stroking your cock—” She flinched. “—then you didn’t enjoy it. I won’t suggest you do so again until you tell me you’re ready, okay?” She met his eyes, the concern ebbing from her expression, and then broke into a beautiful smile and nodded decisively. Curling up against him, she snuggled close, shimmied closer still, and carded fingers through Castiel’s hair as he resumed his long strokes along her back.

It was some time before he felt steady enough to resume shaving Deanna’s cheeks and neck. As Castiel ran the sharpened blade over Deanna’s skin, sheering off the most obvious sign of her masculinity, a plan formed in his mind. There was little Castiel could do to fix most of Deanna’s problems. He couldn’t undo what the King had done, couldn’t help her figure out her gender or her sexuality, couldn’t bring her to another fleshcrafter, but if her penis made her uncomfortable, he could help with that. He could buy her a new cage, one to which only she had the key, and let the choice be hers whether she could be touched, whether she could be pleasured, whether she would be more masculine or more feminine on any given day.

How in the hells was he to contact an enchanter, though, given their current plight?

Castiel shuddered as his throbbing dick slipped from Deanna’s mouth and was struck by cold air. With a bemused, dazed smile, Deanna looked up at him, her eyes wet, her pupils wide and black, her lashes beaded with moisture, her lips plump. Her tongue flicked out, flecked with specks of white, and a rivulet of come ran down her chin. Every breath flared her nostrils as she tried to get enough air, and she seemed unaware that she was listing to one side. Castiel dropped to his knees beside her, prepared to catch her should she fall.

“May I touch your penis, Deanna?” he asked gently, using a thumb to sweep the come from her lips. She stared at him uncomprehendingly, leaned forward, and sucked his finger. His cock twitched and leaked, and he shuddered as residual pleasure swept through him. “Please?” Swallowing, Adam’s apple bobbing, she quirked her head to one side. Her smile widened and she nodded and swooned. Laughing, Castiel caught her and tugged her skirts up. They’d found her a dress that almost fit three days ago at an abandoned farm house. It was worn and dowdy, the handmade lace at the collar and cuffs moth-eaten, and too short, but it was better than pants on the days that Deanna didn’t feel capable of facing even Castiel in the guise of a man. Beneath the pleated folds, Deanna’s cock was erect and dripping. Castiel stroked it a couple times, loving the way it felt in his hand, how it bobbed and leaked at his touch, and Deanna moaned.
“Drain me?” she whispered hopefully.

“I want to try something with your dick,” he explained. “I’ll stop if you don’t like it.”

“I know you will.” Her expression went dopy and expectant. “Such a good Knight.” Castiel gritted his teeth against another surge of pleasure. Leaning back from him, she thrust her hips up, causing her cock to stick out obscenely, and Castiel rose on his knees and shimmied up until he straddled her legs. Her cock brushed against his balls and she shuddered and slumped back, her head hitting the forest floor with a thunk.

“Whadda I do?” she asked, words slurring together.

“Nothing,” said Castiel, grunting as he positioned himself. His cock had retreated limp within his foreskin, but it was still oversensitive, and each time he touched himself bliss flashed as brightly against his eyes as if he’d stared at the sun. Lowering himself, aligning their hips, Castiel toyed with his foreskin, took hold of Deanna’s cock, and carefully stretched his loose skin over her, around her. It was hot and wet, coated with thick saliva and come, and she slid easily within, erection snug beside Castiel’s limp cock. The unfocused look vanished from her eyes; she was suddenly very present and she gasped and thrust against him hard enough that her cock slipped from his grasp, slipped from the envelope of his foreskin, and bounced onto her belly with a splat. She moaned pitifully.

“Was that alright?” Castiel asked. She nodded emphatically. “You’ll need to hold still, okay?”

“Yes – yes, Castiel…I—” She broke off, mouth open wide in a silent exclamation of wonder as Castiel slid her cock within his foreskin once more and stroked himself around her. He’d heard about others doing this, but had never had a partner whom he trusted enough to attempt it, and it felt undeniably weird to have something large and alien inside his skin. It wasn’t like anal, where he felt stretched around thickness; instead, his skin felt drawn thin, and as sensitive as his foreskin usually was, now it was even more so. Sliding her hardness against him, rubbing the thick head of her erection against his softened cock head, felt incredible, and more come dribbled out of him, easing the slick slide of her dick against his.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed, as Castiel wrapped his fist around her encased length and stroked, tugging the skin down around her, massaging her length with a thumb. His hips involuntarily chased his strokes, driving her deeper, pressing her harder against him, and she squeaked out a choked off moan each time he enveloped her completely. If her cock had been larger, this wouldn’t have worked, but their comparative size made it perfect. Her fingers curled in the dirt, and she reached up, grabbed his arms, held on bruisingly hard as her hips rose to meet his. A slick swish-swish accompanied every stroke. It was too soon for Castiel to grow hard again, but the feel of her moving against him, the sounds she made, the knowledge of the pleasure he brought her, all drove him wild. A gentle breeze thinned the sounds of their panting breaths and the wet noises of Castiel’s strokes, and Deanna’s voice grew lower and lower, more broken, more guttural, more masculine. Her skirts bunched around her slim waist. Clutching him, tension building in her body, she struggled to obey Castiel’s invective that she hold still, and Castiel wondered which would be more delicious: if she succeeded, rigid against the ground even as she came, or if she broke, if she thrashed, if she thrust against him. Moments later, he had his answer as she choked on a noise, arched up from the ground, coated his cock with her come, and then slumped back. Gently milking her through her orgasm, he rubbed his foreskin gently over her length and she giggled, twitched, and giggled again.

“Good?” said Castiel huskily.

“So good,” she agreed. She released her grip on his shoulder and ran her fingers up his arm and over
his cheek, using her nails to tease at his stubble. Her cheeks were fresh shaven, as were her balls and
around her cock, and he kissed the tender skin over and over again, delighting in the sound of her
laughter.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

“Ten more minutes…” she managed between giggles.

Castiel groaned. He knew exactly what that meant.

Sure enough, ten minutes later, her hand was on his cock and his fingers were up her ass and it was
going to be a while before they hit the road. At this rate, it’d take them the better part of a month to
get back to the shelter of the Gilded Wood.

As he climaxed choking on Deanna’s name, Castiel found it impossible to care.

The Gilded Wood wasn’t natural. The forest cut across farmland, border as smooth as if an invisible
line divided fields of wheat, on one side, and trees whose trunks were as thick as giant’s chests on
the other side. The boles grew so close together that no one on horseback could ride between them,
and though Castiel had hoped the woods would welcome them and make a path as on their first trip
through, no such magic accommodated them this time.

“We’ll have to take the road,” said Castiel reluctantly.

“Maybe we should go someplace else,” Dean said, his brow furrowed as he gazed at the trees
dividing them from sanctuary as effectively as any fortress wall could have.

“Where?” asked Castiel, glancing at the boy, but Dean just shook his head. His hair was lengthening
out again. The inch that had grown over the past three weeks meant that the uneven cut covered his
ears and constantly fell into his eyes. He’d not shaved in two days, having woken that gray morning
and told Castiel that he was determined to try to be a man. Castiel had offered again to let Dean fuck
him, but Dean had drawn the line there with a horrified look in his eye.

“Until the forest rejects us, I think this is our best bet,” Castiel said. “Failing that, I think the lands of
the mountain giants could provide a safe haven – the expanse we passed through those first few days
out of Lawrence – but we cannot get there from here without passing through the forest. There is no
place safe this side of the mountains. Ilchester is too powerful, Vermilion is too well-equipped, and
the lands are too densely populated for us to disappear.”

“You’ve told me,” Dean agreed, nodding unhappily, gazing toward something unknowable over the
distant horizon. It was dusk, but the flatlands before the forest were so empty that nothing but small
farm houses punctured the smooth curve of the horizon. “I hoped…I would like to go home
someday.”

“Do you think your brother would pursue you as your father does?” Castiel asked. He’d been
thinking for days on their options, and he saw only one way for Dean to return home – after King
John died, when Samuel assumed the throne. Though Dean never said I want to go to Lawrence, he
frequently lamented leaving his brother behind, and Castiel thought that, given the choice, he’d love
to return.

“Absolutely not,” replied Dean.
“If we went to Lawrence and killed your father—”

“No!”

“—then your brother would become King, or perhaps a Regent would be named. Indeed, should you want it you’d have a solid claim to be made King of Lawrence. You are the eldest son, despite your unconventional upbringing.”

Dean looked horrified at the prospect and stammered out, “No, I couldn’t…not in Lawrence…and my father, my father, how can you even…!” Nonplussed, Castiel quirked an eyebrow at Dean, who stopped speaking and scowled.

“You will never convince me that he doesn’t deserve death and worse for what he did to you,” Castiel said. “But if you’d rather he live a long, healthy life and have his punishment extracted from him by hosts of demons as he makes his slow descent through the levels of hell until he finally sinks into the depths of the pit where he belongs, then I will follow your lead.”

“Was…” Dean trailed off. He wouldn’t look at Castiel; he twisted his reins around his hands and stared blankly toward the tree line.

“Come on, let’s head toward the road,” suggested Castiel. He’d learned, over the course of weeks, that his best bet for getting his horse moving was a gentle tug on the reins and a pivot of his hips. The nag let out a shuddering whinny and started in the wrong direction. Castiel steered it around to the way he needed. “We’ve got time to decide what to do next, but either way we need to get through the woods. Going around would take months.”

There was no sounds to suggest that Dean followed him. Castiel let his horse carry him several more paces before he drew rein, waited for the beast to actually stop, and turned to look at Dean. The boy hadn’t moved.


Hearing his name said sharply startled Dean back to the moment. He jumped in his saddle, prompting his horse to take a few steps forward and then give up. He glanced at Castiel, glanced away, and flushed.

“What was so bad?” Dean said.

“What was really so bad?”

“What Papa did to me…treating me as a woman…touching me…was it really so bad?” Dean clarified. Castiel opened his mouth to answer – of course! He didn’t even ask your permission! How could he? – but Dean rushed on. “I was happy in Lawrence, for the most part. And I…I…took pleasure from the times he touched me. He said I shouldn’t – he said I wasn’t supposed to enjoy it, and he left me to clean up alone afterwards, but I did like it and I thought he was a good, caring father to help me as he did and you talk as if it’s a foregone conclusion that what he did was wretched and…and if that’s true about him, what does that mean about me?”

“You’re a victim, Dean,” explained Castiel with forced patience.

“I don’t feel like a victim,” he burst out. “I feel like a woman!”

“Would you like me to call you Deanna for the rest of the day?”

“Yes…no…that’s not at all my point and you know it’s not!” said Dean. “Don’t you see the
“I see a wonderful young person whose father brainwashed them from such a young age that they don’t know what to think,” Castiel answered truthfully. “I don’t mean the male or female thing – I think I’ve made it clear at this point that however you choose to gender yourself, I will follow your lead and my feelings won’t change and regardless of whether you consider yourself male or female or neither you are who you are and there’s nothing wrong with taking a day-by-day approach to your identity. That’s not the problem. John fucking Winchester lied to you, touched you and touched himself, and used you for his own pleasure while trying to deny you yours. I mean exactly what you said – that, for example, he knew that it made you sad to be alone afterwards, knew that you were tired and dirty and would appreciate help, but he denied you that.”

“What, would it have been better if he’d gotten into bed and cuddled with me?” Dean countered.

“It would have been better if he’d let you grow up to be whoever you were going to be, without interfering,” said Castiel.

_It would have been better if Crowley had let me grow up to be whoever I was going to be, without interfering. Would I have been this hard-hearted creature, struggling to explain myself to a person I adore? Would my bluntness still constantly drive a wedge between us? Would I be able to trust, able to love, without this constant terror that I am destroying Dean simply by being near him?_”

“Come off it,” snorted Dean. “Every parent shapes their child.”

“Most parents shape their children by teaching them a trade, or encouraging their interests, or helping them get an apprenticeship, or introducing them to prospective husbands or wives.” Patience was getting harder to come by. “Most parents do not decide to switch the gender of their child, or sexually molest them from a time when they are too young to understand the concept of consent, or take advantage of uneven power dynamics for their own sexual pleasure, or deny their children basic comfort. He selfishly took advantage of your youth and innocence.” Why wouldn’t Dean see? Why did they always end up arguing when they tried to talk about these things? Sometimes, it seemed Dean resented his father, especially how controlling the King had been, but other times—

“I wish he hadn’t chosen you to accompany me,” Dean snapped bitterly. “I wish I’d never asked for your help that night.”

“I wish that too, sometimes,” Castiel agreed, back rigid, voice tight. “I can leave any time you want.”

“No!” The word burst out, shouted over the empty fields, and panic flickered over Dean’s face. “No, Cas, please…”

_He only calls me Cas when he’s really upset. Well, so far he’s only called me that when he’s so far gone on pleasure that he doesn’t know which way is up. That’s a version of upset…_

Dean didn’t look really upset. Perturbed, yes, but not unhinged by it. Confused, Castiel’s lips drew into a tight line as he tilted his head to one side and examined the puzzle that Dean presented. Dean bit his lip and looked away.

“What was your childhood like?” asked Dean, desperation Castiel didn’t understand in his voice. “Was it normal?”

“I never met my parents,” Castiel explained flatly. “My older brother Gabriel and I were sold into slavery when he was ten and I was an infant. Gabriel raised me, with the help of a rotating collection of prostitutes who worked for Crowley. I was friends with some of their children, but Crowley had
plans for me, and those friendships were sacrificed on the altar of my desire to meet and exceed his expectations. Some, he killed; others I killed myself. So no. My childhood was not normal. Even by the standards of Bootbock, my childhood was anything but normal.”

With a slow nod, Dean put heels to his horse’s flanks. Beast and man started forward, catching up with Castiel, passing him by, heading toward the road. When Castiel didn’t follow, he stopped and looked back over his shoulder.

“Will you…will you tell me what a normal childhood looks like?”

No. Thinking about it hurts.

“Once…I thought it looked like yours,” Castiel confessed, taking three tries to get his horse started. “I thought Lawrence was a picture of domestic tranquility. I thought I was a weasel hiding in a chicken coop, dressed up in feathers hoping no one would notice I wasn’t one of the flock.” Dean chuckled.

“Maybe ‘a happy life’ is just a fantasy,” Castiel continued. “Maybe no one has a normal childhood. When I was young, I liked to think that there must be people who lived with their families, their parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins growing up and growing old together, in one large house or on a sprawling farm complex or in a series of nearby farms. I imagined everyone having a place to call their own, a task that was their specialty. Anna churned the butter and Meg mended the dresses and Gabriel taught the youngsters and I…” He trailed off. He’d never known what role he might have had, couldn’t imagine himself in that situation.

I imagined the whores and pimps and thieves and cutthroats of my childhood living happily together, multiplied our rare moments of pseudo-domesticity into a lifetime of camaraderie and love without the demands of capricious masters, capricious johns and janes, capricious pimps and tax collectors and slavers.

“I couldn’t imagine having a family of my own.” Who could love me after the things I’d done? “But I’d be tolerated because I was strong, I could hunt, I could fight. Surely even such a picture of happiness was sometimes threatened from the outside – at those moments, I’d be brave and defend those I loved.” Like I never managed to do in life. “And the rest of the time I’d help with the heavy lifting, train the horses, milk the cows, plow the fields…” He’d never spoken of his dreams to anyone, not even Gabriel, but saying them aloud still conjured childish visions of paradise the likes of which Castiel had never seen in the real world.

“The children…the children would get to be children.” Tears choked Castiel. He couldn’t bring himself to look at Dean but he forced himself to keep talking. “Their parents and family members wouldn’t make unreasonable demands of them. They wouldn’t be expected to shoulder responsibilities that should have belonged to the adults around them – they wouldn’t be asked to grow up too young. They’d live and play and explore, learn and push themselves. They’d help out, of course – everyone would chip in, they’d have to – but when their labor wasn’t needed to sow the seeds or repair the roof, they’d be free as I was never free.”

“As I was never free,” echoed Dean, whispering.

“We wouldn’t be asked to kill…” As I was. “…or raise another child…” As Gabriel was. “…or grift…” Like Balthazar was. “…or spread their legs…” Like Anna was. Like Samandriel was. Like you were. “And at the end of the day, someone who loved us would tuck us into bed and tell us we’d done a good job and kiss us on the forehead and ask nothing more of us. No shows of loyalty. No proof of our love and devotion. No need to repay all the supposed kindness that we’d reaped unasked for. It would be enough that we’d been children for a day, that we’d be children again the
next day, that someday we’d grow into adults who would do the same for our children. It would be enough that we were happy. We’d be enough.”

Tears pooled in his eyes, made wet trails down his cheeks.

“I…” Dean trailed off. There were tears in his eyes, too. “Thank you, Castiel. I think I understand.”

“Things were so simple before I got to know you,” Castiel said bitterly, looking away. Seeing Dean in pain hurt. Why did it hurt?

*Because I love him.*

*Obviously.*

“I didn’t question the path my father had set for me,” Dean agreed.

“I didn’t *feel* anything.”

“I knew what my responsibilities as a dutiful daughter and a royal Princess were.”

“I didn’t have to give a good goddamn about anything or anyone but myself.”

“I knew what my future held.”

“I didn’t need anyone else.”

“I was content; frustrated at times, but I *knew* I was cherished, special, precious. Loved.”

“Now all the pain I tried to ignore for a decade is a constant pressure in my head.”

“Now I don’t know who I am, don’t know where I’m going, don’t know what to think or how to feel about where I’ve been.”

They rode side by side in silence for some minutes. Castiel didn’t need to look toward Dean to know that tears were drying on his cheeks, same as on Castiel’s. Their route had taken them far enough north that it would be a while before they reached the road. Though the day was bright and the air tinged with the earthy smell of spring, a fierce breeze blew across the open farmland, pinking their cheeks, drying their tears, and stealing the warmth from the meager layers of their clothing.

“I’m scared, Castiel,” Dean whispered at length, the words whipped from his mouth by the wind.

“I am too, Dean,” confessed Castiel.

“I lied when I said I wished someone else had been assigned as my escort.”

“I told the truth when I said I wished the same.”

“I love you, Cas.” Dean had never sounded like he meant it more. Surely, Castiel should feel *good* knowing that, should feel warm, but instead he felt cold to his bones. Life would be easier if Dean didn’t reciprocate his feelings. Life would be *so much easier* if they’d never journeyed together, never been intimate, never fallen in love.

Castiel wouldn’t trade what he felt for Dean for an easy life.

“Dean, I love you so much I can’t think straight around you,” said Castiel, smiling helplessly.
They rode minutes more with only the sound of the wind accompanying them. The gusts seemed to stop as they struck the woods, blocked as surely as by a brick wall. The branches didn’t clatter. No birds sang. No animals skittered around the trunks. The creatures of the forest were a part of its mystery and wouldn’t risk breaching the border of their native domain.

“Would you really help me kill my father?” asked Dean abruptly.

“Yes,” said Castiel. He’d killed people he’d loved for Crowley; he’d be thrilled to kill someone he detested for Dean. “Do you want that?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Dean. “Sometimes…but other times…”

“When you make up your mind, I am at your command,” said Castiel. Dean made a startled sound. “Have I ever given you cause to doubt that?”

“Of course you…” Dean trailed off, then continued with wonder in his voice. “No, you haven’t. Even when you brazenly told me you were paid to care, even when you’ve pushed me away, you’ve always made it clear that, whatever your reasons, you’d do as I ordered.” Castiel glanced at her and she met his eyes and blushed. “That’s why I asked for your help, that first night we spent together.”

“You’re right,” said Castiel, nodding. “I will do whatever you order.”

Dean made a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat and said nothing else as minutes stretched to hours and they made their slow, steady way south.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will post on Sunday, February 26th, 2017.
“I can’t do this, Castiel,” Dean hissed as he tugged hard, pointlessly, on the lead reins of Castiel’s horse.

“You can,” said Castiel. “You have to. They’ll recognize me if I take the lead, or if I speak.”

“You think they won’t recognize me?” spluttered Dean. “That’s…that’s Victor Henriksen, he’s been sitting at Papa’s right hand since I was a girl! A…a child! And…and I think that’s Jody next to him, she taught me how to walk in heels! These aren’t just random soldiers – Papa sent people who know me…why?”

“Because they know, as we do, that the road through the forest is a bottleneck. We have to go this way, if we’re heading east, so they’ve blocked the way,” Castiel explained for the third time. When they’d reached the road and discovered it was guarded by soldiers wearing the green-and-gold livery of Lawrence, interrogating every person who tried to pass by in either direction, they’d hastily retreated to concoct a plan: Castiel would wear a disguise, Dean would be…Dean, and they’d try to bullshit their way past a group of people who’d known both of them for years.

Castiel hated their plan, but he didn’t have a better one. If they were caught now they were sunk. Henriksen and Mills both knew him well; both were brave, loyal, devoted, true Knights – the kind of Knights that Dean deserves – and both knew enough of Castiel’s history to suspect that he was none of those things. If either recognized Castiel and Dean, they would stab first and ask questions later. Castiel had been stabbed more than enough for one lifetime, and had no desire to repeat the experience.

“How should I talk?” Dean’s voice squeaked, becoming higher and higher pitched. “How should I act? Castiel—”

“Breathe, Dean,” Castiel interrupted harshly. With the tattered remnants of a saddle blanket wrapped around his head, Castiel couldn’t see a damn thing, and he was constantly on the verge of sneezing as he inhaled musky old horse hairs that reeked of sweat. The last thing he needed was for Dean to panic. Based on what Dean had said, they were close enough to the guard post now that if Castiel was unmasked, he’d be recognized instantly.

“They’re looking at me,” whispered Dean. “What do I do?”

“Act. Natural.”

“Who goes there?” called Henriksen’s familiar, deep voice. It was dulled enough by distance that Castiel guessed they were about fifty feet away.

“Cas…” Dean begged.

“Just an old blind man and his companion.” Castiel forced his voice to a creaky, reedy call that he hoped wouldn’t be recognizable. “Alms for the poor?”

“Identify yourselves, in the name of Lawrence!” Jody’s voice was strident, angry, loud as Dean and Castiel drew closer. At least the boy hadn’t frozen.

“Please, my good Lords, we mean no harm.” It sickened Castiel to force himself to sound so
obsequious, but if they were recognized, Castiel would be killed and Dean would be dragged back to his father and Castiel could no longer honestly say which prospect upset him more, and that was the most upsetting part. “We are making the pilgrimage to Cold Oaks to pray for my vision. We—”

“Names,” snapped Jody. They were close now, 20 feet away at most, maybe 10. Castiel could swear he felt Dean trembling with fear, and hoped like hell it was his imagination.

“Gabriel, my good lords,” said Castiel. He didn’t recall Jody being so unsympathetic to the plight of others. His thoughts churned as he considered what her unexpected attitude might mean. “And this is—”

“My name is Dean.” The boldness in Dean’s voice as he took over, took command, sent a thrill down Castiel’s spine. He spoke deeply, masculinely, not a trace of timidity or subservience or fear in his voice. “This is the King’s Highway and we are innocent travelers. Please, can’t you see that you’re distressing him?” Castiel did his best imitation of ‘distressed,’ cowering into his saddle, looking around every which way as if perturbed that he couldn’t identify the location of the speaker.

“The Princess of Lawrence has been kidnapped,” Henriksen said, brisk and official. Castiel was surprised that they’d say the supposed crime outright, and his mental calculations hastened. What had they been told? What did they believe? Both had served Lawrence since before the Queen died; did they know that Deanna was born Dean? It seemed impossible that John would have kept around anyone who knew, but how could such a thing have been kept secret, no matter how closeted royal children were usually kept? “We seek her, and her abductor, a traitorous Knight.”

Ah, so I am to take the blame for the sins of others.

Not the first time.

Unlikely to be the last time.

“Ain’t never seen a Princess,” said Dean. Their horses stumbled to a halt. Castiel longed to have the use of his eyes, to see if Dean was behaving as marvelously as his words suggested, to see how Mills and Henriksen and whoever else was there reacted. He restrained himself, though. Even if he opened his eyes he could see nothing but a dull glow, and the scratchy fabric of the blanket caused tears to pool and soak the fabric. “Not many Knights, either. I’m trying to help my…my father… and he can’t see anything so of course he hasn’t seen anyone.” The boy shuddered a breath and concern clenched at Castiel’s chest. “We haven’t much money, but we can pay…”

“Are you offering us a bribe?” Henriksen’s sneer was loud in his voice.

“No!” Dean protested. “No, a toll – I thought – father, what do I do?”

Castiel’s stomach twisted to hear Dean call him father.

He said I am similar to John. So alike it disturbed him.

I will not be an abuser. Whatever else I may have been, may be, may become, I’ll not cause Dean that pain.

“We’ve committed no crime,” Castiel struggled to keep his voice weak and unidentifiable. He raised an arm, forced it to tremble, held it out as if in self-defense, deliberately facing the wrong direction.

“Henriksen,” Mills said softly, disgusted.

“But—”
“I know you are worried about Deanna but a bumpkin and a blind man won’t be able to help us,” she interrupted.

Henriksen snorted in annoyance. “The Princess is about your height,” he explained tersely. “Long brown hair, freckles…” He trailed off and Castiel would have given anything to see his expression. There was a tinkle of metal and it took all of Castiel’s willpower not to put his hand to where his sword would have been, had he not hidden it awkwardly beneath his saddle. Thank the Gods Dean hadn’t shaved that morning. “Green eyes. A distinguished air about her. Well dressed. The Knight—” The distinct sound of someone spitting interrupted Henriksen. “—is named Castiel; he has dark hair and blue eyes, tanned skin, a muscular build, and he’s likely armed and armored. If you encounter them, do not approach them. The safety of the Princess is paramount; find us and we will deal with them.”

“Of course,” said Dean faintly. “We’d never…not an armed Knight…and a Princess…come on, Papa, let’s go.” Dean’s insistent tug on the reins jostled Castiel’s hand, and his horse leaned back from the pull, resisting the command that he walk. “Hiya!” Castiel kicked his heels into the horse’s sides as Dean yanked. With an annoyed snort, the beast tottered into motion.

“Be careful, grandfather,” Mills called after them as they walked away. Tension snapped taut in Castiel’s back. “Don’t think that horse is going to survive the journey!” His fears drained.

“Thanks, Lady Knight,” he wheezed over his shoulder. “We’re always careful.”

Though Castiel wished that Dean had held back his sigh of relief until they were farther away, he couldn’t blame Dean for the sentiment. Castiel felt like they’d been let out of a trap.

Unless…

He had too many questions, and not enough answers, the same problem he’d had since King John first gave him this mission.

But at least now he had Dean.

Castiel was getting damn tired of rude awakenings.

That was his first thought as his eyes popped open, instantly alert though he couldn’t have said what had awoken him. They’d made camp partway through the Gilded Wood, at one of several campsites scattered along the route, perfect semi-spheres that might have been carved into the forest beside the road. There was no adjusting to be able to see in the darkness – with the cover of leaves overhead and the thick boles of trees surrounding them, not a flicker of starlight came through the canopy.

Except…

Thinking he must be hallucinating, Castiel blinked. The roots of the trees around them glowed faintly, eerily, so dim that Castiel couldn’t say what color they were, only that there was light. Amidst the tree trunks opposite the road, a globe of light hovered, casting shadows over what was, unmistakably, a path through the forest. The will-o-the-wisp bobbed, swelled, brightened, pulsed with light that traced the folds of the single blanket that he shared with Dean, painted the contours of Dean’s face with silvered lines. Silently, Castiel shook Dean awake.

“Wa’izt?”

“The forest either wants to kill us or has decided to grant us sanctuary,” Castiel murmured. Dean started and sat up so abruptly that he swayed and moaned softly. The will-o-the-wisp flickered pink,
blue, then settled on orange, making the shadows seem aflame.

“‘Twn’t hurt us,” mumbled Dean, perhaps not so awake as Castiel had thought. “Let’s go.”

It took mere minutes to gather their things. They had little, and they’d scarce unpacked the horses, knowing that if their luck turned sour – if, for example, Henriksen or Mills rode by returning to Lawrence and saw Castiel’s now-uncovered face – they might need to flee at any instant. Dean started to mount, but Castiel cut him off with a gesture. The branches were low enough, the path narrow enough, the horses slow enough, that there was no point in riding. As a bonus, Castiel’s horse was less recalcitrant when he didn’t have to bear Castiel’s weight.

The will-o-the-wisp pulsed and brightened further when it became clear that Dean and Castiel intended to follow it. As was the way of its kind, it kept ever ahead of them, ever out of reach, taunting them, leading them on. In the sewers of Bootbock, doom always lay at the end of a will-o-the-wisp journey, or so Castiel had been taught – so he had always believed. Of course, Crowley and his servants and slaves had been Castiel’s source of information. Maybe the will-o-the-wisps had always actually led towards freedom and salvation.

A creaking wooden sound filled the air and Castiel froze. His horse walked into his back, knocking him into the ass of Dean’s horse, and Dean exclaimed wordlessly in surprise. Righting himself, giving his horse a stink eye that he got back reflected a malevolent orange in the beast’s deep brown eyes, Castiel looked back.

The trees had closed in behind them.

“Where are we going?” he snapped.

“I don’t know,” Dean replied, nervous, wary, barely visible around the bulk of his horse as he looked back at Castiel.

“I didn’t mean you should answer my question,” Castiel clarified. “Forest – spirit aiding us, whoever you are – what’s going on?”

There was a whisper of wind through branches, a ghost of a breeze against Castiel’s cheek, the first stir of air he’d felt since they’d entered the forest. It seemed to whisper shhhhh through the deep silence of night.

“Cas—”

Castiel held up a restraining hand and Dean cut off. Closing his eyes, Castiel focused entirely on what he could hear. His horse huffed and stomped. Dean’s horse’s tail swished. Dean breathed softly, gasping slightly with fear at each inhale. The light of the will-o-the-wisp dusted Dean’s eyelids like pink-and-gold sunrise.

A soft, rhythmic sound echoed through the night. At first, Castiel wasn’t sure he actually heard anything. The noise might have been his heartbeat, might have been the blood rushing through his ears, might have been the steady pulse of the will-o-the-wisp’s light. As the drumbeat grew louder and closer, though, it was unmistakable: the pounding of iron-shod horse hooves over packed dirt.

Fearing Dean would speak, Castiel put a finger to his lips but kept his eyes closed, hyper-aware of his surroundings. 10 horses, he estimated, 20 at the most, but definitely more than a handful, running through the night.

“Here!” someone shouted, muffled by distance and the thick wood of tree boles. Castiel’s eyes flew open to find Dean staring at him, terrified and silent, from down the path. The will-o-the-wisp waited
beyond, brilliant bright compared to the darkness surrounding them.

**Whoever it is has seen our guide. They’re looking for us, and now they know where we are.**

**Wait. No. The first time we passed through the Gilded Wood, I couldn’t see the will-o-the-wisp. The forest doesn’t show it to everyone. Whoever is out there doesn’t know we’re here.**

**Unless the forest wants them to know.**

“Campsite – recently used,” called another voice. Henriksen, Castiel thought, but it was hard to say for sure. Certainly, the speaker was male. “They probably heard us coming.”

“They can’t have gotten far.” The second speaker was unmistakably Mills. To Castiel’s ear, she sounded troubled. “Mount back up, Victor. We have to find them. No further harm can be allowed to come to the Princess!”

A frantic gesture from Dean caught Castiel’s attention, the boy waving urgently for Castiel to come close. Dropping the horse’s reins – the stupid animal never moved unless it had to, and with the woods closed behind them, where would it go? – Castiel carefully crossed to where Dean stood.

“Let me talked to them,” Dean whispered desperately.

“Absolutely not.”

“They’re good people, loyal Knights,” implored Dean. “If I explain to them what’s happened, they’ll understand. They might even help.”

“You have far more faith in people than I have,” Castiel replied.

“I do. It’s why I’ve tolerated you for so long,” Dean retorted, “and that’s proved to be a wise decision.”

“Yes, they might understand, and they might help, or they might kill me and drag you back to your father, or to Prince Michael,” said Castiel. “Are you prepared to take that chance with both our lives?”

“No.” Dean sighed, his shoulders slumping dejectedly. “I hate having to be so suspicious all the time.”

Reaching out, Castiel took Dean’s hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed each of the boy’s knuckles. “I know you do,” he murmured. “You are a trusting, caring person by nature. Fortunately for both of us, I’m not.”

“You are,” breathed Dean as the people searching for them continued to call instructions to each other. “You’ve been made suspicious and indifferent by design, but I cannot believe that is your nature.”

The warm feeling that always lingered quietly in Castiel’s chest when he was around Dean blossomed. Moved, afraid one of them might speak too loudly and call attention to them, Castiel gathered Dean in his arms and kissed him with all the passion he felt until he heard the dull, rhythmic thuds of the riders continuing their pursuit down the King’s Highway.

“What was that for?” Dean asked, dazed, smiling.

“I love you,” whispered Castiel fiercely. Dean’s smile widened, and he answered with another kiss,
and another, and another, hands roaming over Castiel’s back, firm chest pressed against Castiel’s, thickening erection bulging against Castiel’s thigh, until he finally pulled away with a gasp. The woods were silent once more, the will-o-the-wisp still the only source of light. Relieved, safe, Castiel leaned in and pressed his lips gloriously to Dean’s once more. It must have been Castiel’s imagination that the brightness and color of the will-o-the-wisp shifted as they continued to make out instead of proceeding into the woods. Surely, fay creatures had better ways of showing their impatience then by turning incandescent neon green and flickering.

Either way, Castiel didn’t care. Dean’s lips were made for kissing. Castiel was the only one who got to kiss them, and he wasn’t going to stop.

The will-o-the-wisp – the entire forest – would have to wait until they were finished.

“Join me, Cas!” Deanna laughed. Castiel turned toward her and froze, stunned.

Sunlight glittered off the crests of dozens of ripples, cast rainbows through waterfall mist, and shimmered off the water sluicing over Deanna’s chest and soaking her hair. Her eyes were open wide and, given the distance between them, there should have been no way that Castiel could see how incredibly green they were, no way they could gather the emerald of the surrounding leaves and glow.

This is a dream.

Blinking, Castiel tried to disperse the illusion. Perhaps the entire night had been a fantasy: they weren’t pursued, they yet lay in the small clearing beside the road, they hadn’t been led to safety, led by the will-o-the-wisp to the same gorgeous, sheltered, secret glade that Deanna had been blessed to access their first time through the forest.

Maybe it’s all been a dream.

Castiel had often slipped into fantasies as a child, guided by Gabriel to imagine life somewhere else. His brother had remembered what their original home had been like, remembered their parents, knew the circumstances that had led them to being sold to Crowley, but for whatever reason he never spoke of it, even though Castiel begged him to as they got older. Resentment over Gabriel’s silence, jealousy of the love he’d known that Castiel had been denied, had played a part in the anger that had led Castiel to betray his brother to Crowley. Gabriel had been nearly 20 years old when Crowley had killed him – when I killed him – and he went to his death with all the secrets of Castiel’s real family.

When the sadness, the loneliness, the pain, became too great to bear, Gabriel would use words to spin illusions of a happier place. Sometimes it was a forest where they lived as lost boys, sometimes it was a city where they slid unnoticed amongst the crowds, sometimes it was a warm farmhouse where they feasted on freshly baked bread and creamy churned butter, sometimes it was a castle with crenelated ramparts and pennant-capped towers that Castiel almost thought he could remember when he closed his eyes, but it was never squalid, it was never over-hot, it was never filthy, never starving, never lonely, never painful. It was never Bootbock.

Maybe Castiel had never left Bootbock. Maybe fleeing, and Lawrence, and beautiful Deanna, were all a fever dream, or his last delusion to escape the agony of Crowley’s cruel vengeance. Surely, that was the only way such a vision of divinity could be before him. Surely, that was the only way that Deanna could love him.

“Castiel?”
Her troubled voice cut through Castiel’s reminiscing. Light haloed her in gold and she held out a hand toward him, naked salvation in a magical pool beckoning him to his doom.

“The water is warm,” she added, smiling serenely. “And I’d love your help shaving.”

Fucking hell.

If this was a dream, Castiel hoped he never woke up to whatever harsh reality he was fleeing. They could find his bones lying bleached amidst his rotting flesh on the forest floor for all he cared.

Unable to find the words to answer, Castiel rose and stripped. Deanna’s eyes widened, her pupils darkened, as Castiel removed his shirt, then his pants. The day was mild-to-warm, but even so, his still-limp cock was bunched close in on his body, his balls tight. A hand went to Deanna’s mouth, another to her chest, as she couldn’t contain her reaction. Her mouth opened, but if any sound came out it was lost in the endless rush of water cascading down the rocky waterfall, surrounding rocks painted in shades of blue and red by lichen, fuzzy with dew-covered moss. Nude and unashamed, Castiel walked to where they’d dumped their packs when, exhausted, they’d arrived in the clearing in the middle of the night. The horses were tied to nearby trees, both asleep, both looking less bedraggled and pathetic than they’d appeared the entire journey. The forest was good for them. He glanced at Deanna, alluring, youthful, gorgeous, and he smiled and turned his attention to finding the razor.

The forest was good for all of them.

Retrieving the blade and the soap, wishing for at least the dozenth time that they’d been able to obtain something to smooth the way into her delicious body, Castiel crossed to the pool, short green grass plush as it tickled his feet. With Deanna a perfect nymph to draw him to temptation and disaster, he didn’t hesitate to step into the water. Some small part of him expected the illusion to fall away in that instant, that frigid cold would envelope him and his Goddess would disappear to be replaced by a banshee screaming for his blood, but the water was pleasantly warm and shallow, the bottom of the pool was sandy and provided sure footing, and Deanna batted her water-flecked eyelashes at him, flashed a shy smile as if they hadn’t been fucking for weeks, and quirked a finger as if she expected him to come running.

Castiel nearly slipped on the even pond floor in his haste to satisfy her command. Holding the razor and soap carefully in one hand, he spread the other arm wide and she collapsed against him, hot and slippery, skin slick and a little rubbery against his. Her fingers found the firm muscles of his shoulder blades, her lips found his, their cocks brushed together just beneath the surface of the water, and heat flared incandescent through Castiel’s mind. Devouring her mouth, Castiel growled low in his throat as he kissed her. Deanna tasted of the sweet honey that the forest had obligingly produced for their breakfast and every breath puffed humid into Castiel’s mouth. As she massaged his back, Castiel dunked the soap in the water and worked up a lather scrubbing down the long, curved line of her spine, stopping at the gentle dip above her shapely ass.

“I want you,” she whispered, voice heavy with desire as she sagged against him.

“You have me,” he promised, kissing the corners of her mouth.

“No…” She whimpered as Castiel dragged the soap between her ass cheeks. One of her hands left Castiel’s back, wrapped around his hand and the soap, and dragged it back down her until she could press one of his fingers against her hole. “I want you.” Her other hand slid slickly around Castiel’s waist, down his belly, and wrapped around his rapidly hardening dick. “I want you.”

“Not with soap,” he said dryly, licking his lips. “It won’t smooth the way enough. I refuse to hurt
“Don’t care,” she said, rutting back against his hand, desperation and desire obvious in every movement. “Want you…need this…Please, Castiel!”

“Hey,” he murmured. Shaking off her hand, he set the soap to float on the surface of the water, adjusted his hold on the closed razor carefully and wrapped his hands around her shoulders, pulling her away from him. “What’s wrong?”

Looking up through her eyelashes – she wasn’t shorter than he, but she was slumped, almost limp against his firm hold – she met his gaze, flushed, and turned away.

“Deanna?” She shuddered when he said her name. “Dean?” he tentatively tried instead, but Deanna shook her head and made a fractured sound in the back of her throat. “I want you. Yes, my general preference is for men, but I love you. Deanna. Whoever you tell me you are, whoever you want to be, I will support you, because underneath the labels and titles and names, you still are, still will be, you.” He’d said similar before, he’d say it again, as many times as Deanna needed to hear it.

Deanna looked up at him again, and Castiel couldn’t tell if the liquid thick around her eyes was water from the pool or tears beading. “That’s not it.” She shook her head and droplets scattered, splashing into the pool and creating new ripples. “I don’t want to run forever. I don’t want to have to hide forever, from the people I love, from the people who love me. I don’t want to have to keep you a secret. You’ve done nothing wrong. No – more than that – you’ve saved me, Castiel. I can’t imagine anyone else in the world reacting to…all of this…the way you have. You’re supportive, kind, caring, so sweet and tender in your way. It scares me – I know it scares you too – but the possibility that I might lose you scares me more.”

Oh, Princess…I’m twenty years your senior, you are going to lose me regardless. The only question is if the end will be soon, on the point of a sword, or in another ten years, when I’m nearly fifty and an elderly man, and you’re in the full blossom of femininity and masculinity at a mere thirty years old.

“We have to talk to Sammy,” she continued, blissfully unaware of his grim thoughts. “Maybe not tell him…this…” Her accompanying gesture left it ambiguous whether she meant their relationship or her genitalia. “…but he’s my brother, and maybe he’d…is it unreasonable to think that he’d…?”

Castiel did not know Prince Samuel well; the boy was only 14, and in Lawrence Castiel was not considered a suitable role model for a young man destined to be King of one of the world’s great Kingdoms. However, everything he’d seen of Samuel suggested he was upright, honorable, and devoted to his sister.

King John had appeared similarly, though.

A memory struck Castiel, of how displeased Samuel had looked when King John had announced Deanna’s upcoming nuptials. Samuel was not a puppet for his father. He had his own opinions about things, perhaps even suspicions about their father’s intentions when he arranged Deanna’s marriage. Surely a Crown Prince had access to information that Castiel couldn’t guess at and might understand John’s motivations in selling his daughter to a foreign Kingdom to secure an alliance. Based on Castiel’s knowledge of the political situation of Lawrence and Vermilion, he couldn’t guess what Lawrence stood to gain by such a relationship.

As he thought, Deanna fell silent, biting her lip, looking away from him, ashamed.

“We can contact Samuel,” Castiel promised. Her lips quivered as she looked up at him, grateful tears
swimming in her soulful eyes. “For now…may I take care of you, your Highness?”

“Yes,” she breathed. Castiel brought the soap to her face and rubbed the thick lather on three-days stubble, casually flicking the razor open with his other hand. “Yes, Castiel…”

“Shh,” he whispered the remonstrance against her lips, gently working their mouths together, scooping his soapy hand against small of her back to push her against him. Her hard cock slid wetly against Castiel’s thigh and Deanna moaned. “I’ve got you.”

They kissed lazily in the warm spring air, rutting against each other. Despite Deanna’s urgent words, her supple body moved slowly, following his lead. Tracing a line down her chin and neck with his tongue, Castiel eased around until he was pressed against her back, his cock slotted against her ass. She rucked back against him, and he laid a hand over her heart and made soothing sounds in her ear until she calmed. Only when she was still did Castiel cease sucking red marks into her shoulder and splash a hand across the water until he found the floating soap. Grabbing it, he lathered her front and carefully drew the blade of the razor up her body, sheering the strands of hair that had sprouted cross her chest and down her sternum. She heaved beneath his touches.

“Keep still, Highness,” he murmured, triggering another moan from deep within her. “I don’t want to hurt you.” Red lines yet marred her breasts and thighs where the cuts from Alastair had mostly healed, a reminder of how vulnerable Deanna was, how much danger she was yet in.

“You’ll never hurt me,” she replied in a fervent whisper. “At least not physically.” The distinction hurt but Castiel had to acknowledge it was on the mark. Leaning back against him more heavily, Deanna released her tension with a huge sigh and managed to slow her breathing.

Lines of soap and exposed skin showed clearly where he’d already run his blade, and stroke by delicate stroke, Castiel stripped her skin of every strand of undesired hair. Where he’d cleaned, the skin was pale though tinged with red, sensitive and incredibly, irresistibly smooth. When her chest was shorn, he turned to her arms, her shoulders, shifted her in his arms until he could see to her cheeks, chin, and upper lip. By the time he finished, desperate whimpers punctuated each stilted breath she took as she struggled to restrain herself.

“May I touch your dick today, Deanna?”

A hitched sound whose meaning Castiel couldn’t guess burst from her and she fell back against him, rutting her crotch against his.

“Is that a yes?”

He wouldn’t take her acquiescence for granted. Some days, she wanted to explore how her dick could be touched and pleasured, but other days having her cock interacted with was too intense, and still other days her erections made her profoundly uncomfortable. Even when he asked and got permission, she sometimes changed her mind when his fingers groped her. The first time he’d sucked her off, she’d broken down and cried with her cock between his lips and his fingers up her ass and Castiel had been forced to make her tell him she didn’t like it.

She’d gotten better about telling him her honest desires since then.

“I’m not…no,” she whispered. “I think no. But please, Castiel…I don’t want to wait any longer…”

“On the shore,” he ordered, and she scrambled toward the banks, sending seething waves in all directions. Several steps from him she paused, looked back to be sure he was following, smiled and held out a hand for him to take. Juggling soap and razor, he managed to hold both in one hand and
took hers in the other, but his sudsy fingers slid free. Laughing, she skipped out of the pool and threw herself on the ground, coy and teasing, cock hard and flush with her belly, looking a promise at him.

For the second time, Castiel froze, dazzled by his Princess. She was all long slim limbs and endless pale skin flushed pink from embarrassment and arousal and the warmth of the water.

“Castiel?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yes?” he replied, throat dry, voice ragged and hoarse.

“Is something the matter?”

“You’re spectacular,” he replied. “You’re beautiful.” Her flush deepened. “You’re captivating.” Long strides sent water sloshing, lapping so far up the bank that it dampened Deanna’s feet, and Castiel dropped to his knees when he reached the bank and crawled awkwardly to her, nicking a finger on the sharp razor blade. “You’re stunning.” He would cast it aside, but he had plans for it. “You’re gorgeous.” Locking eyes with her, he lowered his head and kissed the arch of her foot. “You’re unbelievable.” She looked startled, but then arched back against the ground with a soft moan as he sucked at the sensitive skin. “You’re pristine.” They’d both been filthy from days on the road in soiled clothes, often lacking shoes, no access to water, but now she was clean and he wanted to worship her. “You’re my Goddess.”

“Cas,” she breathed as he licked a line of her calf and sucked gently against her inner thigh. She spread her legs wider to accommodate him, exposing her wrinkled balls, her twitching, leaking cock, her pink, puckered hole.

Soon.

“I’m almost done,” he promised, voice husky. Careful to avoid touching her erection, Castiel lathered around her dick, her balls, the smooth, tender cleft of skin around her hole, and, with infinite care, ran the razor over the delicate skin. As the blade lifted clear the soap and hairs, he kissed each revealed place, and her thighs trembled with restraint. He wiped the suds away on the soft grass beside them and continued, stroke by stroke, until she was completely bare. Once, Castiel would have been bothered to see a grown man shaved; the way it feminized and youthened men made him uncomfortable even though he had a preference for boys just reaching the blossom of adulthood, those old enough to know what they were doing but young enough to still be slim, underdeveloped, androgynous. Deanna was different, though. However she wanted to be was beautiful to him, and he knew she loved being smooth and clean, loved being pampered and cared for.

“There,” he whispered hot against her balls. “How does that feel?”

“Please,” she begged, skimming through his hair with her fingers. Looking up, her cock dominating his view as he placed tiny licks against her perineum, he caught her eye as she stared down at him. Restrained desire vibrated through her, made her dick tremble and her legs quiver. “I need…”

“I know,” he breathed directly against her hole. Tossing the razor and soap aside, he played a slick finger over the pucker, pressing in barely, captivated by the way she clenched and relaxed against the intrusion.

“No…I told you…Castiel, please,” she pleaded. “I’m ready…we’re safe…I want to feel your cock. I need to feel your cock.”

“Not with soap,” he reiterated, pressing the finger in until his fingertip and nail disappeared within
her body. She moaned.

“Not—” Castiel bent the finger sharply and she broke off with a strangled gasp. “Not soap!” she managed. “Flask…in my bag…I bought it…didn’t tell you…” With a confused twist of his lips, Castiel pulled his fingers out, relishing her pitiful moan; her legs flailed and her hole tightened and flexed around nothing. He scrambled to where he’d left her bag after retrieving the soap and razor and dumped the contents haphazardly onto the ground. “Please, Cas!” Spurred on by the delicious noises Deanna made, he ransacked amidst worn clothing, twine, a roll of bandages, and other odds and ends until he finally found a flask made of hardened leather.

“Got it,” he growled. He turned back to her.

And froze.

Again.

Deanna was arched against the ground, eyes closed, face toward him. Her cheeks were flushed crimson and her lips parted around desperate breaths. One of her hands toyed with her nipple, twisting and teasing the tightened nub. Her other arm lay across her torso, fingers spread around her cock and balls, pressing into the newly-shaved skin. Her cock twitched, leaking a steady stream of thin liquid onto the back of her hand.

Castiel didn’t remember crossing the space between them, didn’t remember coating his hands with the contents of the flask – oil, similar to that which John had sent Deanna with on their initial journey – didn’t remember sinking two fingers into her body. He came back to himself when a delicious, deep sound rumbled through Deanna’s body. Castiel’s own need had been easy to ignore when he was seeing to her, but now it flared to urgent life. He had to get his cock in her. With hasty, jerky movements he smeared oil over her channel, dripped it thick around her hole, then hastily stroked himself to slick himself up. Closing the flask and tossing it aside, indifferent to the mess he made on the outside of the bottle, he rose to climb atop her, only to hesitate.

“Cas?” Her eyes flickered open, pupils dark and over-large, swallowing the green.

Something about pressing her into the ground beneath him, forcing her hips against the hard soil as he slammed into her, felt wrong. Trusting his instincts, Castiel shifted to one side and flopped on to his back. His slickened cock stuck straight up, glistening with oil, red with arousal, an open invitation. Deanna’s eyes came into focus as she watched him, widening with surprise, and her breath caught. With slow, clumsy, languid movements, she stopped playing with herself, got her hands under her, pushed herself up, and straddled Castiel’s hips.

“Yes…good…”

“What do I do?” she asked, skimming her fingers over the firm muscles of his chest. Castiel reached down and took a hold of his cock, holding it up, and placed his other hand on Deanna’s hip.

“Lower yourself until you can feel my dick,“ he instructed. She did so, eyes slipping shut. Her expression went rapturous with expectation when she found his cock. She trembled so badly that Castiel was surprised she could hold herself up. “There – just like—” The oil ensured that Castiel slid easily against her, his cock butting up against her pucker, and he broke off with a deep groan. She caught his eye and smiled impishly, rolling her hips against his dick. “Just have to…just have to get it started…it can be hard…hold still…” Laughing, Deanna halted, and despite the levity of her expression, Castiel could feel her thighs trembling were they pressed against his sides. His cock bumped against her pucker and he shuddered.
Fumbling blindly, Castiel ran slick fingers along the cleft of her ass, over her hole, and her shaking amplified, noisy pants leaking free of her at every breath. Castiel pressed a finger into her, tugged her rim loose, tugged down so she’d lower herself, held himself lined up. The first two times, his cock head slipped over her ass despite their preparation, but on the third, she spread for him, opened, and spectacular pressure enveloped Castiel’s cock as he slid into Deanna’s body for the first time. Her eyes popped open and her jaw dropped, expression growing more awed the deeper Castiel’s cock penetrated her until, finally, her thighs settled against his crotch.

Fuck…have to…have to move…have to…

“How does that feel?” he asked, gritting his teeth, wrapping his hands around her hips, forcing himself to keep still.

“Weird,” she whispered. “It’s…it’s so big…and…” She wiggled, clenched involuntarily, and Castiel groaned and let his eyes slide shut. All he wanted was to thrust up into her body until he lost his mind. Two months ago, he would have done exactly that, and her feelings be damned. But now…he needed her to want this, needed her to enjoy this, needed to be told he wasn’t hurting her.

“We can stop,” promised Castiel. “We—”

“No!” she interrupted. “Don’t want to…don’t want to stop…just…I need a moment…a few moments…is that okay?”

“It’s fine,” Castiel breathed, making himself take deep, calming inhales, making himself release them slowly. “Take as long as you need.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.” Leaning forward, forcing another groan from Castiel, she laid her hands on his chest and experimentally pivoted against his cock. She whimpered, nails digging into his skin. “It feels…you feel…different. I don’t know what I expected…maybe that it’d feel like the toy that Papa gave me…but…it doesn’t feel like when you use your fingers, or like the…the…dildo…but…” Castiel was glad she kept talking. It kept him sane, kept him cognizant of the price of seizing what he craved, and gave him something to focus on other than his aching, long-neglected cock. When was the last time he’d gotten to fill someone? He wasn’t sure. Years. Slowly, painfully slowly, she lifted herself up until he was barely in her, lowered herself just as slowly with a replete sigh.

“It’s good,” she breathed.

“Take your time,” said Castiel, even as he wondered if he could honor his own words. He didn’t want to go slow. He wanted to pound her into the ground. That’s why I put her on top.

She made an inarticulate sound of agreement and didn’t move for long seconds. A shimmy punctuated the delay, caused Castiel’s balls to slap against his thigh, and she giggled and shimmied again. Desire flashed like St. Elmo’s Fire against his eyes, brilliant bright, magical and impossible.

“Teasing me on purpose now?” he asked bitterly.

“Maybe a little,” she admitted, flicking a coy fingernail over his nipple. Choking on nothing, Castiel bucked against the ground but managed to keep himself mostly still, fingers digging into Deanna’s hips, bone hard beneath his touch. She gasped, but managed, “how does it feel? For you?”

“Hot,” ground out Castiel. Talking about the feelings suffusing him made it impossible to ignore how damn good he felt. “You know it feels when I wrap my hand around you? How the places I touch are warmed, how the friction tingles through you?”

“Yeah.”
“It’s like that, but everywhere along my length, all at once,” he explained. “And all I want is to rub, to make that friction build, to feel it spread through my body, to—” A groan shattered his train of thought as she lifted herself again, settled herself against him again, still moving so slowly Castiel could cry, still so glorious that if he did cry they’d be tears of joy. “You could try it sometime, if you wanted. On me. I like being fucked almost as much as I like…”

She lifted herself again, settled herself again with a breathy moan. “As much as you like fucking me?”

“Yes…”

There was no pause in her movements this time; no sooner had she lowered herself full onto his cock than she lifted herself again, lowered herself again, this time adding a twist with her hips as she did. Not missing a beat, she continued, fucking her wonderful, wet, hot hole on his cock. The sounds she made grew increasingly delicious, more and more of her weight settled onto her hands, onto Castiel’s chest, as she shifted forward and experimented with different angles, different movements, all with the same steady, agonizing tempo. Surrendering to her lead completely, Castiel eased against the ground and let her use him to seize her pleasure. Everything felt awesome, and he’d have been hard pressed to say whether there were angles or pivots that felt better than others. As long as she kept moving, as long as she encompassed him and drove him wild with wave upon wave of molten bliss, Castiel was satisfied. There was hardly room in his head for more thought than the words that whispered from his lips.

“Don’t stop.”

It was a fervent prayer to his Goddess, a desperate expression of how good Deanna felt around him, an unspoken hope that he was giving her as much pleasure as he received.

“Don’t stop, Deanna.”

She moaned to hear her name breathed raspy and deep and for the first time her composure broke and she thrust her hips down hard.

“Don’t stop,” he whispered.

Her weight shook over him and Castiel forced his eyes open. Her face was scrunched in concentration, eyes closed, mouth pursed around hot breaths. Sweat streaked her face and made curly ringlets of her sloppily cut hair. A pink flush ran from her forehead, ripened her cheeks, trailed splotches of red down her neck and chest, a contrast to her normally pale skin. With a pained noise that worried Castiel only for an instant before all thought was obliterated, she raised herself slow and then thrust down, hard, taking all of him at once in one quick, confident movement. Moaning, she repeated the movement again, again, again, drilling herself on his dick.

“Don’t stop,” he begged.

Sex had never felt this good. Despite Deanna’s inexperience, her uncertainty, her sometimes awkward movements, it was glorious. Was this what it was like to make love? He’d thought himself in love before, but clearly he’d been wrong. All he wanted was for her to keep moving, to never stop, and apparently she wanted the same because she granted his request and kept going, accelerating her pace, movements small and deliberate and quick as she huffed out desperate breaths and seized bliss from Castiel’s cock.

“Castiel…” she whispered. “Please…”
“What is it?” he asked. *Anything for you.* “Tell me what you need.”

“I want… I can’t…” Whimpers punctuated her words. Her pivots grew sloppy, her moans broken and urgent. “Please, please, please, please…”

“May I touch your coc—”

“No! No… no… no… want to dr… want to come just like this… I’m so… ” she moaned and stopped bothering to lift herself up, rocking her hips against his crotch. “It feels so good, oh Gods, I had no idea it would feel this good…”

Grunting each time she bottomed out around him, Castiel tightened his grip on her hips, lifted her up an inch or two, and drove his hips up from the ground, stuffing her full of his cock. Her eyes opened, unseeing and dark, and her jaw dropped around a masculine, alluring groan.

“Let it go,” Castiel whispered, fucking up into her body relentlessly. “Just *feel,* my Princess.”

“Castiel!” Deanna’s fingers slid off the slick sweat that beaded over his chest as he worked. She barely caught her weight, struggling to hold still as Castiel held her right where he wanted her. “Casi… *Cas*!”

“Yes,” he growled. He fucking *loved* when she lost so much control that she called him by the nickname.

“Cas! Cas, Cas, Cas, Cas…” She chanted his name in time to his thrusts, exclaimed loud into the quiet glade. Her channel tightened around him, driving him wild, and Castiel thrust harder and harder, chasing his own bliss that seemed just out of reach.

“Cas!” With a scream that he *thought* was her saying his name again, Deanna’s cock spurted even as it continued to bounce with each of his thrusts, lines of her thick come pooling on Castiel’s belly. “Oh *Cas*!” Her arms gave way and she collapsed against him, writhing and whimpering. Releasing her hips, settling them both to the ground, he stopped his thrusts with difficulty and wrapped his arms around her.

“Are you alright?” he asked, concerned. She was used to orgasming without a touch to her cock, and Castiel had seen her do so repeatedly, but the violence of her reaction this time worried him.

“Don’t stop!” She ground the words out, so harsh and dry Castiel wasn’t sure he’d heard her right until she repeated, “don’t you *dare* stop, boy.”

Something in Castiel broke. In a lifetime surrounded by sex, by whores and lovers, no one had *ever* said anything like that to Castiel. With a roar, he wrapped his arms tight around her, rolled them over so that he was atop her, and let go his inhibitions. At the first slick drag of his cock within her she moaned, got her arms around his back, raked his flesh with her nails. Her legs wrapped loose around his hips, barely held her in place as Castiel fucked into her like an animal. His restraint was gone. His concern was gone. All that remained was the irresistible drive to take what he needed from Deanna’s willing body. She gasped and moaned beneath him, shook and whimpered, clenched and flexed, went loose and pliant only to seize around him as if…

...as if she were coming again and again…

With a groan torn from his very soul, Castiel pressed his sweaty forehead to Deanna’s clavicle and spilled himself sloppy and hot in her body. He couldn’t stop his hips from slamming into her, couldn’t hold back the noises he made, couldn’t prevent himself from rocking and rocking against her through his protracted climax, but finally he stuttered to a halt, gasping for breath.
“Don’t stop,” she whispered dazedly. Shocked, Castiel opened his eyes – it was an effort; they felt glued shut by sweat and tears – and stared at his Goddess. The flush extended down her torso, and tears leaked from beneath her closed eyes. Her expression was twisted, maybe even pained, Castiel thought, and her hips continued to work against his slowly softening cock, forcing oil and come out of her body as her rim twirled around him. “Cas…”

“Shh,” he murmured in her ear. His voice was shattered, his limbs already growing heavy with sated pleasure, but as incredible as it was that she wasn’t satisfied yet, her need was obvious and undeniable. Sliding himself free of her body brought a broken sob from Deanna, and Castiel whispered a steady stream of reassuring noises into her ear, though he wasn’t sure how much she could actually process. Castiel slipped an arm beneath her neck, lay between her spread legs, traced fingers down her side as she whimpered and writhed beneath him, making incoherent pleading noises.

Loose and thoroughly coated with come and oil, her ass was ready, her hole spread easily as he pressed two fingers into her. The shocked gasp she made was thoroughly satisfying, the way she ground her hips desperately down against the intrusion would have had Castiel getting hard again if he hadn’t just come. He wanted to get hard again, wanted to fuck her through the frenzy of need that had her enthralled, but he couldn’t, so instead he brought the pads of his fingers against the nub that was the nexus of her pleasure and he rubbed, and rubbed, and she pivoted against him and sobbed.

“Just like that, Deanna,” he murmured encouragingly.

“Cas!” She pressed her tear-streaked face against his neck and clung to him. One leg wrapped around his hips, rubbed her cock against his crotch. “Please!”

“I’ve got you, beautiful,” he whispered. “Just let it go – let it happen – let me give you what you need.”

Teeth dug into his flesh as she nodded against him, mewling around her over-stimulated sobs, and as Castiel continued to massage within her body she shook apart against him again and again. By the time she stopped, though only minutes had passed, Castiel was – as inconceivable as it was to him – hard again.

“Do it,” she slurred.

“Deanna…”

Collapsing back against the ground, her eyes popped open, out of focus but staring in the general direction of Castiel’s face. Tears and sweat, indistinguishable, coated her cheeks, spit slickened her chin, her lip was swollen where she’d bitten at it, her freckles were a dark smattering of dots against her reddened skin, and there was something terrible and powerful to the way she whispered, “do it.”

*I did this to her.*

*No. We did this to each other.*

*And, Gods and Spirits defend me, I’m going to do it. I’m going to fuck her.*

Deanna lifted her legs once more, wrapped them around him, hooked her ankles, pivoted her hips up in invitation, and Castiel’s erection found her hole and slid in shockingly easy as he pulled his hand out of the way. She was so loose and so wet and so ready. A quiet moan escaped her, and though he’d just come, though they’d just started again, Castiel was so hard it hurt, so turned on that the heat of arousal flared jarring agony through his body at every stroke. It felt so good he could die of it, so
fantastic he might incinerate. With languid, deliberate strokes – not gentle, just slow – Castiel took what Deanna offered him freely as she lay limp and spent beneath him.

“I love you,” he whispered, tears in his eyes. “I don’t even have the words for…” How did she do this to him? “…how perfect I think you are…” How could sex this filthy be so tender and wonderful and, somehow, healing? “…how special…” Thrusting into her body, Castiel felt whole as he never had before. “…how much I want you…” She moaned. “…how badly I want to take care of you…” Their bodies slid together, sweat slicking where they were pressed chest to chest. “…how determined I am to protect you…” He felt too weak to move but he forced his head up, kissed Deanna’s lips, took in the stunning view of her half-lidded eyes and sweat-matted hair as she puffed out little vocal breaths every time he pushed his cock into her once more. “…I’m yours.”

“My Knight,” she breathed as if the words meant nothing.

They meant everything to Castiel, mattered so much that it terrified him.

“Yes, your Knight,” he agreed. He’d swear any vow of devotion, any oath of fealty, that Deanna wanted. His body was electric with pleasure, incandescent with bliss, hovered on the edge of unimaginable rapture.

“My good boy,” she continued with a wicked twist of her lips. Castiel made a broken noise, slammed his hips against her thighs and, foregoing thrusting, humped hard into her body. Hitched moans escaped her, her channel clenched around him, and in Castiel’s bliss-befuddled mind it occurred to him that she might actually come again.

Men’s bodies don’t work that way. How is she…? Does it matter? She is, and good God does it make me hot to know I’m the one doing this to her, that she’s never experienced this in anyone’s arms but my own.

Deanna’s hand ghosted up his back, threaded into his hair, and she pet him like a favorite pet. “Such a good boy, Cas…always so good to me.”

“Deanna,” he ground out. Light flashed against his eyes, so bright he wasn’t sure if they were open or closed, if he was dazzled or light-blind or staring at his eyelids.

“Say my name,” she commanded.

“Deann—”

“Castiel, say my name.” As dazed as she sounded, her words were still an order he couldn’t possibly deny.

“Dean!” The masculine name was torn from him as his thoughts blanked. Deanna – Dean? – seized around him, shaking, and Castiel buried himself hard in her body and came, hips rutting uselessly against her, jerking in time to the spurt that he could feel as if each individual load of come was being torn from his body, drawn from him magnet-like by the sated and somnolent Goddess that lay beneath him. Exhausted and spent, he collapsed, trying to catch his breath, every brush against his skin too much, every joint aching with bliss.

“I love my good boy,” she whispered in his ear, sounding half-asleep. “Love you so much, Cas.”

“Princess…”

“Rest now,” she continued. “You did so well – you took such good care of me. I’m so glad it was you, Cas. I never want it to be anyone but you.”
Castiel wasn’t even sure what it meant, but he whispered, “it’ll always be me, Deanna.” He wasn’t sure if she understood, but she cooed a pleased sound and continued to pet down his back. All their troubles fell away while they shared an embrace. Castiel had never felt better in his life, and he never wanted this to end, though if pressed he knew he couldn’t say what this was. It was a feeling, a thought, a sensation, a presence, a sense of belonging and comfort and family and home that Castiel had never experienced before, never dared hope to experience in his life. It, for him, was lying in Deanna’s arms, his limp cock still stretching her loosened hole, her body hot against him, every breathy noise escaping her pleased and satisfied. It, whatever it was, was perfect, and he hoped that whatever Deanna had in mind matched what he experienced.

“Never let you go,” he vowed.

“Good,” she whispered, “’Cause you’re mine.” A happy smile painted his face and the weight of a lifetime lifted euphorically from his shoulders. Castiel had finally found his place. Though they were both a mess of come and sweat, he felt too good to keep his eyes open. Dozing, Castiel let himself drift in contentment, confident that Deanna did the same beneath him.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter Posts March 1st, 2017.
“I need a favor,” Castiel said.

A bird flapped obliviously nearby, splashing water over its colorful wings. They’d been in the forest a week, and since the first night they’d seen no sign of any other person. Animals abounded. Unintimidated by the presence of humans and domesticated horses, birds of every description, mice and squirrels and other rodents, raccoons and badgers and weasels, deer and another horned animal of a kind Castiel had never seen before, all came to partake of the fresh spring water that poured from deep underground, cascaded over the rocks and formed the stunning pool. One gray morning, Castiel had emerged from the small cave they’d sheltered in and found a bear drinking its fill, surrounded by an unintimidated flock of sparrows. Every creature that came coexisted peacefully, so far as Castiel could tell, though elsewhere in the forest they must be predator and prey or else a creature the size of a bear would surely starve.

“Please? Can you help?”

Castiel felt ridiculous talking to the open air. Deanna yet slept, sheltered and safe. The cave was warmed, presumably by the same source as kept the water a comfortable temperature, and Castiel had built them a bed of dead leaves contained in the remnants of the blanket they’d carried from Ilchester. Some magical creature must be responsible for the existence of this safe haven, for their welcome there, but so far Castiel hadn’t seen anything unnatural save the will-o-the-wisp, which had disappeared as soon as they’d arrived. After their first day there, even the path they’d taken had closed off. There was no exit from the glade – it was surrounded by thick-grown trees that crowded close to each other – yet the animals didn’t have any difficulty coming and going. Castiel occasionally wondered if he and Deanna would be free to leave should they wish to do so, but thus far it hadn’t been worth worrying about.

“If it makes a difference, it’s not something for me – it’s for Deanna,” he continued. Someone, some power capable of sentience, must be behind the magic that had brought them to this place, must be responsible for the apparent truce observed by the wildlife.

“There’s something she’s unhappy about,” explained Castiel, still talking for no reason he could fathom. “I have a way to fix it for her, but I need help.” They’d been deliriously happy since they’d arrived at the glade. Though ostensibly there was nothing to do, the time had passed quickly. Partly, that was because they had a lot of sex, so much that Castiel’s cock ached pleasantly. Even when they weren’t wrapped in each other’s embrace, the small area provided a surprising amount of entertainment. Deanna was endlessly curious and determined to learn about the natural world, so he taught her everything he knew. That knowledge often didn’t extend to knowing the names of specific plants – he’d been raised in a city, after all – but trial and error and intense observation had taught him which plants grew in which climates and which were edible, which were medicinal, and which poisonous.

“Please?”

No one responded to his plea. The birds played a complex game that seemed one part splashing, one part flapping, and one part strutting, all while trilling their lungs out. A chicken, incongruous in the wild, pecked at the dirt along the banks of the pond. A whirligig skimmed along the surface of the water while two dragonflies frolicked overhead. Everything was lovely and absolutely useless to
him. Huffing out a frustrated breath, Castiel turned and froze.

A horse stood behind him. A flicker of panic buzzed through his mind – *it's a rider, they've found us* – only to be replaced by jaw-dropping wonder as what he saw registered in his mind. The horse had silver-purple hair, a rainbow mane, and a horn, the point of which shone like a lighthouse beacon.

*Or like a will-o-the-wisp.*

Not a horse.

A unicorn.

“Um...she’s not a virgin,” said Castiel, dumb-struck. The unicorn whinnied and shook its head, an almost musical sound shimmering through the air as its mane swayed about its neck. “But I thought unicorns...never mind.” He shook his head as the unicorn gave him an unmistakable stink eye. Castiel couldn’t have said how the unicorn’s mien communicated exasperation, but there it was, exasperated with him. “I need to get a message delivered to Bootbock, along with a small package.” The unicorn looked at him askance, and Castiel felt judged. “It’s so I can buy her a gift. Something she wants. Something that will protect her – from her father, from strangers, even from me if necessary.”

The unicorn stomped a foot in what Castiel thought might be approval.

“Are you able to deliver such a thing?”

Another stomp.

“Is that a yes?”

The unicorn blew out, puffed its nostrils, and rolled its eyes to show the whites all around.

Castiel supposed that was a yes.

The rest was easy; Castiel had written the note the night before, using a piece of a ruined shirt as paper and charcoal as a pencil. It wasn’t fine work but it was legible, and the two non-descript but excellent quality uncut gemstones he picked out to accompany the message would more than pay for what he requested.

“When her gift is done, will you or some other agent of the forest be able to retrieve it for me?” he asked uncertainly. The unicorn stomped again. “Thank you.”

The unicorn nickered softly.

Holding out the bundle of cloth, tied with twine around the gems, Castiel waited to see what would happen. The unicorn didn’t move, but a bird – a morning dove, tweeting happily – flapped down from the trees, took the package in its clawed feet, and flew away.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Castiel?” Deanna’s voice startled Castiel and he turned around to see his Goddess looking as lovely as ever, disheveled, eyes half-lidded with drowsiness. Despite her tired appearance, she was clothed in her dress already, and her mother’s tiara rested askew on her head. “Who were you talking to?”

“Oh, just—” He turned back.

The unicorn was gone.
“No one – it’s nothing,” he said, shaking his head. Deanna quirked an eyebrow at him, shook her head, and smiled.

“I’d like you to call me Dean today,” said Dean.

“Of course.”

“And I’d like you to come back to bed.” Dean gave Castiel a coy look and held out a hand invitingly.

Castiel scarce remembered crossing the distance between them, and as he sank his cock into her loose, supple, welcoming body, he couldn’t be bothered to be ashamed of how completely enthralled he was by Dean.

“Perfect,” Dean breathed. Castiel shuddered through a second peek of pleasure, hard on the heels of his first. Come dripped down his length, smeared between their bodies as Dean continued to slowly pump against Castiel’s cock, straddling him. Dean’s dick, small and hard, dripped beads of clear release onto Castiel’s stomach.

“May I touch your dick?” asked Castiel gruffly. After a moment’s hesitation, Dean nodded, and Castiel reached out, cupped Dean’s cock in his hand and stroked gently. By listening carefully to Dean, by considering when he wanted to be touched and when he didn’t want to be touched, Castiel had pieced together that the boy’s long-trapped cock was extremely sensitive. Sure enough, Castiel had barely skinned his fingers over the protective foreskin and the exposed head before Dean was trembling and whimpering, grinding down against Castiel’s softening dick.

“I’d like to feel you inside of me,” Castiel suggested. Dean moaned, hips stuttering to a stop. “Right now.”

“Now?” Dean swallowed hard. “Um…okay…yeah…I’ll try…”

“Hey, hey – wait,” said Castiel as Dean started to rise. The boy froze. “Only if you want to.”

“Are you sure?” asked Dean with obvious relief. “If that’s something you want, I’m willing to try. You’ve been so good to me…”

“Dean, I’m not good to you so that you’ll accede to my requests,” Castiel explained patiently. This is the damage done by John. This is the belief that somehow when Dean allows others access to his body, he owes them something in exchange for the pleasure that’s been given. I’m still not convinced he thinks himself entitled to that pleasure. Perhaps abasing himself for the pleasure of his partner helps him accept the pleasure he’s taken from intercourse? “You never need to force yourself for me. I’d feel exceedingly guilty if you had sex with me simply to appease me.”

“No!” he exclaimed. “No, that’s never happened. But if you…” Dean huffed out a breath. “You’ve mentioned more than once having me inside you, and if that’s something you want, I’m willing to try but the concept makes me profoundly uncomfortable. I’m not a…I mean…” He trailed off, sighed, and his erection flagged. Finally, he mumbled, “Maybe you should call me Deanna.”

“If that’s your preference at the moment…” said Castiel doubtfully.

“It’s not,” admitted Dean, “But if I’m Dean, that means I’m a man, and that I accept my penis, and…I don’t know…doesn’t that mean I should want to penetrate you? Isn’t that what men want?”

“Oh no,” laughed Castiel, hoisting himself up on his elbows. Dean yet straddled Castiel’s hips, but
Castiel’s cock had slid slickly out and a cold trail of come and oil oozed a path down the crack of Castiel’s ass. “I’m not about to make any blanket statements about what men want. Men are individuals, just like women are. Some want penetrative sex, some want oral sex, some want sex with men, some want sex with women, some want to be fingered, others don’t want a touch anywhere near their ass, some don’t want sex at all. Sexual desires are individual, and there are many permutations as there are people. Heck, I knew a slave in Bootbock who got off on having snakes slither all over him. Made one hell of a party act.” Dean laughed ruefully. “If you are Dean today, that doesn’t mean you have to want to have sex with me, and if you’re Deanna tomorrow, that doesn’t mean you have to not want to have sex with me. My ass is at your disposal, if you’re ever so inclined. That should be your takeaway.”

“I thought your come in my ass was my takeaway,” Dean said blithely, grinning at him.

“Where’d you learn to talk so dirty?” said Castiel, shaking his head. Dean leaned down and kissed him, his cock resting semi-erect on Castiel’s belly.

“I’ve had a fantastic teacher,” Dean replied.

“If you’re up for it, today’s lesson could involve my tongue on your cock,” suggested Castiel.

“Counter offer?” Dean asked. Castiel nodded. “Your mouth on my cock, and my fingers inside you.”

“Sold,” Castiel breathed.

Five minutes later, Dean tentatively thrust into Castiel’s open mouth, confidently fingered Castiel’s ass. Dazed, Castiel realized that Dean was probably going to get him off multiple times.

Again.

As inexperienced as Dean was in many regards, he could finger a prostate like a champ.

Castiel focused on the pleasure and refused to think about why Dean was so skilled in particular area.

Dean’d had a fantastic teacher, alright, but it wasn’t Castiel. Castiel didn’t mind that Dean’d had other sexual partners – it’d be damn hypocritical of him if he did – but he did mind, profoundly, that Dean had had only one previous sexual partner, and it was King John.

The son of a bitch had to pay, even if Dean appeared at peace with what had happened.

And if he doesn’t want me going after John...well, he never has to know...

“Are you sure about this?” Castiel asked. He’d repressed the question all morning after Deanna told him her intentions, repressed it on the long, meandering walk through the forest back to the King’s Road, but as they approached the right of way, barely visible as a line of semi-obscured sunshine in the otherwise dark woods, Castiel couldn’t contain himself any longer.

“No,” Deanna admitted. She sighed out a breath and smoothed down the front of her dress. “But do you have a better idea?”

“We can stay in the forest until the search for you ends,” suggested Castiel. “I expect it’ll only take a few months.”

“Six months?” she asked. Castiel shrugged. “A year?” He opened his mouth to answer, but Deanna
didn’t give him the opportunity. “And what will everyone believe in the meantime? That you
kidnapped me? Attacked me? Used me? Raped me? Will those who care about me worry? Will my
brother think I’m dead? Will everyone I respect and care for hate the man I love? Then, if we come
out of hiding…what then? Where will we go? Who will take us in? After so long in seclusion, so
long during which you might have influenced me, will anyone believe what I say?”

She’s right, you know.

Of course she’s right. She’s always right. It was a fond thought, without a trace of rancor. “What will
you say?” he said.

“The truth,” said Deanna with a determined glint in her eye. “I can show them…direct evidence…if
necessary.” Though not pleased, she sounded resigned to the prospect of baring her body. “It’s
already been more than a month since I ‘disappeared,’ it may be too late already. But there’s no time
like the present. If things go poorly, we can retreat back into the forest. Whatever spirits here have
taken pity on us, I cannot see that being rescinded because we interact with the soldiers of
Lawrence.”

They’ve taken pity on you, my beautiful Princess. They scarce trust me. They recognize me for what
I am, as you refuse to.

“Very well,” conceded Castiel. His hand rested with apparent negligence on the hilt of his sword,
nerves singing. “Shall we?”

“Yes…let’s…”

Deanna reached across the short distance separating them, took Castiel’s free hand, and interlaced
their fingers. With a faux confident smile, she led the way through the screen of tress and out onto
the road.

They hadn’t bothered bringing their horses. The two old mounts had grown sedate, complacent,
happy in the glade. Gone native, Castiel had joked, but it was true. They were healthier than they’d
ever been. The lame mare no longer limped. The magic of the place seeped into their bones, healed
and nourished them, and Castiel was loathe to take them from that. Even unmounted, Castiel and
Deanna could walk as fast as the two horses could go, and with no expectation that they’d need to
flee anywhere far, quickly, there seemed no point in dragging the tired old beasts along. On foot,
they crossed onto the King’s Road and started towards the east end of the forest. Though the trees
closed behind them, sealing them away from the secrets buried deep in the woods, a constant
glimmer of light teased at the edge of Castiel’s vision – a will-o-the-wisp to guide them back if
should they need aid, the horn of a unicorn shining like the pole star, a vision to guide them home.

Home.

Castiel tightened his grip on Deanna’s hand. Wherever Deanna was, as long as they were together,
Castiel was home.

Knowing their destination, the paths through the forest had guided them where they needed to be,
but as a pinprick before them slowly brightened and grew, the woods so dense that the light at the
eastern end appeared as if at the end of a tunnel, Castiel realized magic had hastened their journey as
well. It had been a long day of walking, but it had only been a day. If Deanna noticed the
incongruity, she said nothing, but as they drew nearer and nearer to the border of the woods, her grip
grew slick in his, her palm sweaty, her fingers tense and clammy.

“I won’t let them hurt you,” Castiel vowed. Deanna snorted a laugh, and Castiel looked a question at
“I was thinking the same,” she explained with an apologetic smile. “I won’t let them hurt you, my Knight.”

Rubbing a soothing thumb against the back of Deanna’s hand, rubbing his other thumb over the hilt of his sword, Castiel walked side by side with the damn love of his life and wondered what awaited them. Deanna was confidently, a peasant’s dress skimming over the flat planes and soft lines of her body, a pair of stout boots on her feet, her hair tamed into the semblance of a short, feminine cut as best as Castiel could manage for her with their razor, and her mother’s crown resting on her forehead, opals iridescent, glowing more and more brightly the closer they got to the exit.

People lingering about the border were visible as dark silhouettes against the bright light of an overcast day. Whoever they were, they saw Deanna and Castiel, for no sooner had Castiel realized that they were there than they started shouting. Castiel’s chest tightened and Deanna’s hand clenched against his.

“We can still turn back,” he murmured reassuringly. Deanna answered with her body language, standing tall, back straight, gaze fierce and fixed straight ahead. She’d grown in the past months, literally and figuratively, grown in confidence, grown in pride, grown in strength, and she was taller, able to look him in the eye. Deanna spent so much time trying to make herself appear small, appear feminine even on the days she was Dean, that Castiel had failed to notice. Ashamed of his oversight, he vowed silently to do better. Deanna deserved to be noticed, deserved his careful attention and observation. She dropped his hand, took a deep breath, and waited for the people – soldiers, Castiel saw as they approached – to come to her.

“Who goes there?” shouted a wary voice.

*Play it cool, take it slow, find out who they are first, don’t—*

“I am Princess Deanna Winchester of Lawrence and I *demand* to speak with the Knight in command of your troop.”

*...or do that.*

“The Princess?”

“Is that the Princess?”

“The traitor is beside her!”

“Draw, men, to her aid!”

“No.” Deanna’s voice rang with command in the closeness of the forest. Though they were scant yards from the border, they might as well have been yet deep in the woods, for there was no thinning of the trees. “If you lay hands on my Knight Castiel I will consider it the equivalent of laying hands on my own person and I will see you punished.” The branches seemed to press lower, the trunks to abut the road closer, as if to deny the end of the woods, as if to protect Deanna from the aggression of the approaching troops. The soldiers, perhaps responding to the ominous vibe of the forest, perhaps responding to the royal air that Deanna projected as naturally as breathing, stopped, many with swords half drawn, a respectful distance away. “Is Lady Jody Mills with you?”

For a long moment no one answered, the question hanging in the air, and then a nervous young man stepped forward – Castiel recognized him with a surprising twinge of jealousy as the soldier whom Deanna had once thought cute – and said, “Lady Mills has returned to Lawrence to brief his Royal
Majesty on our progress—"

“…or lack there of…” murmured some malcontent from amongst the group.

“—leaving Sir Henriksen in command. If your Highness would care to speak with him…?”

“I would.”

“We’re under strict orders to kill the former Knight Castiel on sight,” said another soldier apologetically. The voice was vaguely familiar, a women Castiel had sparred with from time to time.

“Who gave that command?” Deanna asked.

“His Majesty King John Winchester spoke it to Sir Henriksen and Lady Mills when he sent us off.”

“It was quite a rousing speech.”

“It’s nothing personal, Sir Knight!”

“My father doesn’t have all the facts,” lied Deanna. Castiel felt a chill at how easily the words tripped from her tongue. John Winchester knew exactly what the score was, and of course he wanted Castiel dead.

But if I kill him first…

But she doesn’t want me to kill her father...

...if he keeps doing things like threaten to kill me, or try to kill me, she might yet change her mind...

God, what if one of these idiots tells Crowley and Dick Roman where to find me?

He’d been so focused on Deanna’s problems he’d hardly thought about his own. With a scowl, he tried and failed to shake the tension out of his shoulders.

“Until he is made fully familiar with the situation, my orders take precedent,” Deanna continued.

“I’m sorry to contradict you, your Highness, but my orders take precedence here.” The disorganized group of soldiers hesitating before them snapped into parade attention and stepped aside as Henriksen spoke softly in a voice that instantly commanded respect. Castiel glanced at Deanna, and only because he looked at the right moment did he see her expression tighten. She’d said that she didn’t have a great relationship with Henriksen, that he was always so focused on his duty and his responsibilities that he’d been impossible to befriend. That’s why she’d asked for Mills, hoped that Mills would be available, but this was the hand they’d been dealt and they’d have to manage.

“Sir Knight,” Deanna said respectfully, inclining her head.

“Your Highness,” Henriksen echoed, stopping before them and bowing deeply. “Men, seize the traitor Castiel.”

“Please, Sir Knight!” implored Deanna.

“We can speak, your Highness, and you can explain your strange position, but not here, and not with him standing beside you, influencing you,” Henriksen said.

“He’s not influencing me,” Deanna denied stridently. “Castiel has no hold on me. He’s saved me! He __”
“Your Highness,” Henriksen interrupted, unphased by the furious look that his rudeness brought to her face. “Do not be a child. This is how things have to happen. Soldiers?”

Deanna’s lips compressed in a thin, pale, angry line but she didn’t attempt to stop Castiel being captured. Though he stared fury at the soldiers who’d once been his allies, he let them take his arms, let them bind him, let them drag him from Deanna’s side.

“But we shant leave the forest,” said Deanna. “Anything you say to me, you can say to me here, and Castiel will stay here as well.” The words were plaintive but no sooner had they left her mouth that the trees loomed and the dim light that seeped between the branches grew dimmer. The men muttered uncomfortably, and even unflappable Henriksen shifted and looked askance.

“How can I know that you aren’t under duress if we must speak in this haunted place?” said Henriksen skeptically. “You are doing little to instill confidence in me, Highness.”

“My word is my bond,” said Deanna, gathering courage and confidence about herself like a mantle. “Ask my anything, and I will answer truthfully for all to hear. You know me, Henriksen. You know the kind of person I am.”

“Yes, Highness,” acknowledge Henriksen. “You are very…” The words faded to an indistinct blur as the soldiers holding Castiel dragged him towards the end of the road, toward the open fields beyond the forest, but the closer they got to the edge, the closer the trees hedged them in, crowding the road impossibly, branches interlacing close overhead, a constant threat. Muttering amongst themselves, the soldiers stopped within the confines of the wood, where Castiel could barely hear the conversation, some of what Henriksen lost to distance and blurred because he faced away from Castiel. At least Castiel could still hear Deanna, still see that she was safe. If Henriksen hurt her…

“What happened to you after you left Lawrence? Why didn’t you meet your escort in Ilchester?” Henriksen’s voice was clearer once the rustling of movement and the ominous creak of the surrounding trees faded, once the soldiers stopped trying to drag Castiel farther. Castiel was momentarily surprised – why would the forest try to protect him? A breeze rustled leaves overhead and Castiel looked around and wondered for the first time if they’d misinterpreted their situation in the woods. Maybe Deanna wasn’t the only one being protected? Considering the ramifications of that, considering what possible justifications there might be for it, was better than getting anxious wondering how, exactly, Deanna would answer Henriksen’s question.

“I knew Sir Castiel to be a skilled, competent man,” Deanna began slowly. Ringing endorsement, that… “So I was not unduly distressed when my father took the unusual step of sending me to my engagement with only one person to escort me. The journey was uneventful, and the advantages of a small entourage were immediately apparent: we attracted no attention, excited no comment, and the cost of the journey was minimal. Castiel was companionable and the time passed quickly. However, I was surprised when he informed me that we would be traveling to Vermilion by way of Ilchester. Doing so was a considerable detour, but Castiel indicated that it was my father’s will, that an appointment had been made for me there, so I acceded. It’s not for me to question what the King does, right?”

The soldiers around murmured assent. Deanna had yet to say anything about her gender, yet to say anything about her relationship with Castiel, yet to hint at the issues at the crux of their problem. He wondered if she would mention them in such a public forum, or wait until she had convinced Henriksen enough that the Knight agreed to speak with them privately.

If she convinced Henriksen…

“We arrived punctually in Ilchester, a month into our journey,” Deanna continued. “Castiel and I had
an argument, so I attended my appointment with the Inquisitor, Alastair, by myself. Have you heard
of Inquisitor Alastair?”

“I heard mention of him in Ilchester” Henrikksen begrudgingly admitted.

“Before I reported to my meeting with him I asked around but none in the city would tell me of him,”
explained Deanna. “It made me nervous. Most Inquisitors who run businesses advertise freely. I
passed many such shops, made obvious around the city by colorful signs and fanciful illusions. I
wondered – what did Alastair do that was kept so secret? Yet, Pa…my father wanted me to go, and I
am ever obedient to his wishes, eager to meet his expectations, so I went.” She took a deep,
fortifying breath, and Castiel’s heart ached for her. There was so much she wasn’t saying, so much
she was being careful of, he could only imagine how her thoughts must be spinning. “Alastair is a
fleshcrafter, Henrikksen. As far as I can tell, I was sent there to be…transformed…but first, he…” She
took another deep breath. Castiel would have given a lot to see Henrikksen’s face. The soldiers
around him betrayed a range of responses, from the total disinterest of the peon who knew his or her
job was to do as they were told and ignore the rest, from avid curiosity, to disgust. “Knowing that he
was to modify my body I suppose he saw no danger in doing…other things…to me first. He…he cut
me, unnecessarily. Stabbed me in the stomach. Touched me inappropriately.”

He did? That son of a horned dog. She never told me that. I’m glad I killed him.

“Even so—” Henrikksen tried to interject, but Deanna interrupted him and continued relentlessly.

“Fondled me inappropriately. If Castiel hadn’t come for me despite our argument, I don’t know what
would have happened. I’ve had nightmares about it ever since.” Her voice dropped as she described
her assault, and Castiel grimaced. He’d woken more than once to the sound of Deanna whimpering
distress in his ear, shaking against him, but he’d not asked her what she’d imagined and she’d never
volunteered the information.

Did Alastair rape her? I knew it was a danger, that’s why I strived to get to her quickly.

Why didn’t she tell me?

Anger seethed beneath his skin. Alastair was dead; being mad at him retroactively was useless. King
John was the originator of Deanna’s suffering. He’d used Castiel as a pawn to abet his plans, abused
Deanna from early childhood to mold her into his ideal of a wife and a mother, sent her to be tortured
without a care. Only John’s certainty of Castiel’s indifference and expendability could explain why,
of all his Knights, Castiel was sent to accompany Deanna.

I might have never gotten to know her. I might have never fallen in love. I might yet be torn from her
side.

Castiel’s chest ached. Had his hands not been bound, he’d have clutched his sword. As it was,
fantasies of the many ways he could kill the King – ideally only after a great deal of suffering –
flickered half-formed through his mind.

“Alastair is dead now,” said Deanna. “I wanted to believe my father couldn’t have knowingly sent
me to such a man, but the things Alastair told me while I was under his knife…and then, as we were
fleeing, I found my mother’s tiara…” She reached up and touched the circlet about her head. Opals
gleamed despite the dimness of the day, white gold lustrous, delicate filigree framing her hair. “…
which I suppose was sent as payment for my…treatment…” She trailed off, and silence stretched
out, broken only by an eerie breeze whistling between the close-set tree trunks.

“Very well,” Henrikksen said when it became clear that Deanna didn’t intend to continue. She had a
hand yet raised awkwardly, protectively, across her flat chest. “None of that explains why you did not continue on to Vermilion.”

“Unfortunately, I have several reasons to be suspicious of my father’s intentions,” said Deanna, carefully picking her words. “Alastair’s reputation was not a secret; Castiel was able to learn the truth about him in hours. As wise and deliberate as my father is I cannot believe that he did not do his due diligence before sending me to the man – I can believe that even less than I can believe that he would send me to someone who would harm me. Furthermore, that only Castiel was chosen to escort me was always strange. We were not an…obvious…match, and it took much of the journey before we reached an amicable understanding and were able to communicate effectively. While we were in Ilchester, a man from Castiel’s past tried to kill him, and we believe that my father informed this man of Castiel’s whereabouts. There are many hints that something more is going on here than meets the eye. Until I…until we…learned the truth, I did not want to tie my future to an unknown Prince.”

“A wise decision, Princess,” said an unctuous, depressingly familiar voice. Castiel twisted against the grip of those restraining him and, as he’d feared, was confronted by Crowley. The bastard looked exactly the same as he had the last time Castiel had seen him, nearly a decade ago: receding hairline, salt-and-pepper scruff over his cheek, a fine suit, and a slouched-over way of walking. He pulled a hand from his pocket to give Castiel a small, mocking wave, a smirk twisted his lips, and he winked as he met Castiel’s eyes and said, “Hello, darling.”

A chill shiver went down Castiel’s spine and he couldn’t stop himself from trembling against his captor’s hold. Two of them looked at him, surprised. A thousand terrible memories came back to him at the sight of Crowley, a thousand times he’d seen Crowley smirk in precisely that same way before twisting Castiel around his finger, before twisting a knife in the chest of someone Castiel loved, before twisting reality around until Castiel didn’t know what was right or wrong and Crowley seemed the only point of sanity in a world gone mad, the only person that Castiel could believe.

How very wrong Castiel had been.

“Castiel, who is that?” asked Deanna uncertainly.

“Crowley,” Castiel said, cutting the name of short. Deanna gasped.

“The prisoner will be silent!”

“Prisoner?” Crowley broke into a predatory smile. “Come now, we’re all friends here, isn’t that right, Sir Henriksen?” Castiel’s head jerked around to see Henriksen scowling at the odious double-dealer, but Henriksen didn’t contradict the assertion.

This is it. I’m going to die.

“You are right about several things, your Highness,” continued Crowley with an exaggerated drawl. He strolled over to Castiel and tapped him on the nose, ignoring Castiel’s answering snarl. “The King is definitely up to something, though I’m still trying to figure out precisely what. You are a delightful, charming, questionably innocent pawn in that game. As, I assure you, is Castiel – okay, not delightful, not charming, and undeniably guilty, but still a pawn. However, you are painfully incorrect if you believe that my goal is to kill Castiel.”

“What?” Castiel exclaimed, furious. “I know you—”

“Quiet now, sweet cheeks,” said Crowley, laying a finger over Castiel’s lips. It was all Castiel could do not to bite him; his mouth worked in impotent fury. Those holding him tightened their grips lest he try to break free. “The grown-ups are talking. Castiel is…like a son to me…raised him myself,
you know. I’d never seek to hurt him. He’s far too valuable.”

Me? Valuable? I’m no one. I’m a tool.

Why do I think I’m a tool?

Because that’s what Crowley always told me.

Dizzying thoughts burst one after another into Castiel’s head, but he had too little information to make sense of what Crowley was hinting at.

“Speak plain, you rat bastard.” Every word was forced out, guttural and nearly incomprehensible. Crowley slid his hand from Castiel’s mouth to his cheek and gave him a pinch and a gentle slap.


“Sir Knight?” Deanna interjected hesitantly. There was an answer on the tip of Castiel’s tongue before he realized she was talking to Henriksen.

“Yes, your Highness?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“What’s going on?”

“When King John called the manhunt for you and Sir Castiel, some of us…doubted…whether such extreme actions were necessary,” Henriksen explained. Crowley gave him an encouraging smile.

“The circumstances of your arranged marriage, so soon after your 18th birthday, when no warning had been given, seemed odd. That you’d be sent to Vermilion with only a single Knight as an escort, and that the escort was Castiel, of all of us, also struck us as unusual. Unprecedented, even. When asked, Ambassador Shurley would give few details of the arrangement, and before anyone could question things you’d already left. Then, word circulated a more formal escort was being sent to meet you outside of Ilchester. Why Ilchester? Several of us began our own investigation, but we could find nothing. Absolutely nothing. For so little information to exist suggested that someone was deliberately covering their tracks. Expressing my concern for your safety, I convinced his Majesty to give me the command of your escort, but you never met with us. While we sought word of you in Ilchester, we learned of the death of the mage Alastair, and the deaths at the inn where you had stayed, and an abduction seemed most likely.” He snapped his mouth shut on the last word and glared at Crowley, crossing his arms over his chest.

“That’s where I came on the scene,” Crowley said with a debonair smile. “With these oafs clunking around Ilchester making a racket, far more people were learning my business than I wanted involved. I put these fine soldiers off the scent, sent them back towards Lawrence, while I assumed that you and your abductee would go to ground in the city.” He gave Castiel another fond pat on the cheek, and Castiel’s eyes narrowed murderously.

“Wait – why does Queen Naomi want me dead? I’ve never been to Vermilion. I’ve never met the Queen.
“You always were fond of fleeing to the sewers when things went awry.” Crowley chuckled as if he’d made a joke. Castiel had run away repeatedly after Gabriel had died, and Crowley had always dragged him back, until Castiel finally had Roman, and later John Winchester, to protect him. “By the time I realized you had fled, and in the stupidest possible direction, it was too late. Fortunately I have many…information sources…and I was able to track you to this forest. The good Sir Knight and the lovely Lady who shared command with him heard me out, and decided that there were enough irregularities in your disappearance that we should all have a nice chat before sending the Princess back to her loving, devoted father. Conving them to spare the life of my darling protégé was more difficult, but based on what I heard about your relationship at the inn at Ilchester, I figured her Highness would take care that her father’s troops didn’t kill you.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Henriksen. He turned to Deanna. “Your Highness?”

“Castiel and I are in love,” she admitted begrudgingly.

“He’s old enough to be your father,” Henriksen hissed, spinning ‘round and directing a furious glare at Castiel. “How dare you?”

“This was my choice, Sir Knight,” Deanna said firmly. “Prince Michael of Vermilion is older than Castiel and has never met me, but despite that none hesitated to think us an appropriate match — or at least, none spoke to me of that hesitation save my brother, and no one attempted to interfere. Castiel and I have been traveling together for two months. We know each other intimately, trust each other, care for each other. Castiel saved my life, when there’d have been none to know or care save me if he’d left me to my fate. My father has never given me a choice in my life. Castiel has given me all the choices in the world, and I’ve chosen him over my father’s plan for me. If you can’t respect that, you should leave now.”

“Uh uh uh,” clucked Crowley, shaking his head. “No one should leave yet. We all have so many questions; it would be a shame not to have a big group hug-and-share.”

“Very well,” said Henriksen tightly. “Soldiers, let the traitor go.” The troops dropped their hold on Castiel, and one used a knife to slice through his bindings. Castiel jerked his arms away, straightened himself proudly, and lay a hand on his sword.

“I’m not a traitor,” he said with what dignity he could muster.

“Nonsense, of course you are,” said Crowley fondly. “You’re exactly what I raised you to be. If only you’d stayed with me longer, you’d be amazed at the things you could have learned.”

“Tell me or don’t tell me, Fergus,” Castiel snapped. “But stop teasing me. Highness, are you alright?” He held out an arm to her and she hastened to his side and caught him in a hug.

“I’m scared,” she whispered for his ears alone, holding him tightly.

“As long as we stay in the forest, there’s only so much they can do to us,” he promised. Wrapping his arms around her trembling shoulders, he looked ice at Henriksen and Crowley in turn. “Send the soldiers away, and if you want to talk, talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter posts March 5th, 2017.
Dusk fell while Henriksen organized a camp so that they could talk privately in a setting that both they and he could trust. Since Castiel and Deanna refused to leave the forest, and Henriksen was suspicious of the woods, they compromised by erecting a tent right at the entrance, just within the tree line. It scarce left room for other travelers to pass by, but Henriksen didn’t care about the inconvenience he was causing, and Crowley delighted in the long line of impatient people whose wagons and belongings were being inspected by the soldiers of Lawrence. Outside the Gilded Woods, afternoon was still bright, but full dark enthralled the forest. Crickets and owls and other night creatures filled the air with their song.

To ensure the comfort of the Princess, the tent was bedecked with cushions and rugs produced from who-knew-where and a modest fire was built in the center. Meat roasted over the flames, suffusing the air with pungent, delicious smells. They’d not eaten since breakfast, and had subsisted largely on produce since they’d found sanctuary in the woods, and Castiel’s mouth watered as he eyed the cooking haunches of what he thought was mutton. Despite the comfort around them, Castiel and Deanna stood by the tent flaps leading out, tense and suspicious.

“Is this acceptable?” asked Henriksen, frustrated at the many delays.

“Anything is fine with me,” Crowley replied. “I’ve got nothing to hide…” He trailed off and smirked at Castiel and Deanna. Henriksen turned to look at them as well, skepticism clear in every line of his brow and smile.

“Why does the Queen of Vermilion want me dead?” Castiel demanded.

“That’s not how this is going to work,” said Henriksen, shaking his head. “I will ask the questions, you will answer them, and if – if – you can convince me that you didn’t kidnap the Princess and… and…” Still shaking his head, Henriksen trailed off.

“My dear friend wants to know if you raped her lovely Highness,” supplied Crowley. Henriksen snorted, disgruntled, but didn’t contradict him. Deanna flushed, cheeks appearing an unhealthy shade of red due to the warm light of the blazing fire, and curled closer to Castiel. He hated to see her so shy, so withdrawn. It wasn’t like her. He missed his brave Goddess, the person who had fearlessly, without blinking or missing a beat, watched Castiel kill a man. What had changed, that now she behaved like a shrinking violet?

“The Princess actually propositioned me,” Castiel said mildly, refusing to let their behavior anger him further.

“Really?” Henriksen’s voice was sarcastic with disbelief. “Why would she do that?”

“Maybe she liked my charming personality,” replied Castiel with equal disdain.

“Listen, you asshole, you’re lucky I didn’t have you killed on sight, but if you keep—”

“Stop,” Deanna interrupted. Though she still cowered against Castiel, her voice was strong, and her fingers dug into his chest. “Castiel is telling the truth, Sir Knight. I approached him and asked for his help when we were about a week out on Lawrence. I knew it was wrong, but I’d been under my father’s roof…under my father’s thumb…for as long as I could remember, and in mere weeks I was
to be married and under my husband’s influence instead. I wanted, just once in my life, to make a choice for myself. Castiel was attractive and had been flirting with me for days, clearly trying to win my favor, and I thought…why not?”

Castiel blinked. If her account was true, that was far more…calculated…than he’d realized.

*Anouchka, *A person after my own heart. Damn do I love her.

Wrapping his arm more securely about her shoulders, Castiel stared defiance at Henriksen and Crowley in turn.

“Tell us the good part,” Crowley suggested with a leer, glancing from Castiel to Deanna and back again.

“How did you find out?” asked Castiel, resigned.

“Find out what?” demanded Henriksen.

“‘Find out?’” Crowley echoed mockingly. “I was involved, my boy.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Find out what?”

“Hush, Henriksen. If you tried listening instead of blustering, you might learn something,” said Crowley. “The *noble* King Winchester needed help to…dispose…of certain members of his household – permanently. All those lovely nurses and servants who had helped his Queen through her confinement and raised his precious eldest child had to be dealt with. Lawrence is such a fine, upstanding kingdom; far be it for the King to sully his hands with such base matters.”

“He hired you to kill them,” said Castiel with a sigh.

“No!” exclaimed Deanna, jerking away from him.

“Some of them,” Crowley agreed placidly. Deanna choked on another pained noise. “Those who were younger, who didn’t know much, he sold. You met some of them before you left, Castiel. Inias was a stable boy who used to take Queen Mary and her child out riding. Hannah was a scullery at the palace. If you’d known to ask the right questions, there’d have been no mystery here.”

“Find out what?” Henriksen roared.

“Do you want to do the honors, or shall I?” asked Crowley, gesturing invitation.

There was a pregnant pause. Henriksen was so riled up Castiel thought steam should be coming from the man’s ears.

“I’m a man,” whispered Deanna.

“A little louder,” Crowley suggested. “He can’t hear you over the sound of his teeth grinding.”

“I’m a man,” Deanna repeated stridently. Henriksen’s jaw dropped. “I have a *penis*. I don’t have a *vagina*. I don’t have *breasts*. I can’t have *children*. My father lied to you. He lied to me. He lied to Ambassador Shurley and Prince Michael and Queen Naomi. He lied to *everyone*.”

“That’s impossible,” breathed Henriksen. “If you were a man, someone would *know*.”
Crowley opened his mouth, presumably to say something snarky and unhelpful, but he snapped it shut again as, with quiet dignity, Deanna disentangled herself from Castiel’s embrace and stepped into the center of the tent. The shabby dress she wore was overlarge on her, and a simple tug on the rope belt around her waist loosened it and allowed her to shrug the garment off.

She was naked beneath.

Henriksen made a strangled sound and spun so he wasn’t looking. Crowley leered again and nodded his appreciation. The fire cast Deanna’s skin in lurid shades of orange and yellow, made her look jaundiced and ill. The cold made her limp cock and balls scrunch close against her body, appearing even smaller than normal. Nonetheless, her anatomy was unmistakably male.

“He looks a lot like Samandriel,” said Crowley. “You have a type, Cassie.” The use of the nickname boiled pure fury through Castiel’s veins. It was bad enough that Crowley had exposed Deanna, shamed her, and brought her grief with the knowledge of the fate of those she’d cared about as a child. To dig at Castiel by imitating Gabriel, by recalling Gabriel’s fate to his mind, was beyond the pale. He shifted a hand to his sword and glared murder at Crowley, but before could act on his rage, Deanna spoke.

“Look at me, Henriksen,” Deanna commanded, ignoring Crowley.

“It wouldn’t be right, Princ…ess…” Henriksen was so choked up he hardly got the words out.

“Perhaps Castiel has lied to me,” continued Deanna, compelling, undeniable. Startled, Castiel stared a question at her, but she shot him a crooked, sad smile, and he eased back, flanking her protectively, staring at Crowley, daring him to interrupt. “It wouldn’t be the first time. We were intimate for weeks before I learned my true gender, and even then, I figured it out and confronted him. He’s the only person I’ve spoken to of my father’s behavior. Before I heard what Crowley said, I thought Castiel and my father and those who were sent away were the only ones who knew the truth. Castiel tells me that what Papa did isn’t normal, that fathers don’t usually dress their sons as daughters, that fathers don’t usually touch their children intimately, that fathers don’t touch themselves while touching their children.” Henriksen spun around, horrified, hand going to the hilt of his sheathed sword. With a deliberate show of professionalism, he gave Deanna a look up and down and grimaced at what he saw. “So tell me, Sir Knight: has Castiel lied to me? When my father used to come to my bedroom and stare at me; when I reached puberty and he started touching me – was that normal?”

“No, Highness.” Henriksen shook his head, wide-eyed, mouth set in a tight, troubled line. “That is most definitely not normal. I’m so sorry. If I’d known….” He shook his head again, at a loss for words.

“No, Highness.” Henriksen shook his head, wide-eyed, mouth set in a tight, troubled line. “That is most definitely not normal. I’m so sorry. If I’d known…” He shook his head again, at a loss for words.

“If I’d known,” agreed Deanna sadly. Squatting down, she retrieved the dress bunched at her feet and covered herself once more. “If I’d realized, I might have gone for help, but I didn’t know his behavior wasn’t normal. I didn’t know that he didn’t love me. I thought – he told me – that his actions were those of a good parent, and that all parents who loved their daughters acted similarly. He’d always been so good and kind to me. Why should I doubt him?”

“Clearly, I handled things with you all wrong, Castiel.” Crowley grinned. “I’ll admit it never even occurred to me to isolate you and brainwash you. King John is a consummate professional. He should consider the slave trade!”

“Give me one reason I shouldn’t kill you,” Castiel grated out. Henriksen raised a hand in objection, but said nothing, and unless Castiel much misjudged him, the assessing look in Henriksen’s eyes suggested that he was also awaiting a reason to stay his hand.
“Don’t you want to know why Queen Naomi wants you dead?” teased Crowley. “I promise, this oaf hasn’t a clue. He didn’t even realize his King was a pedophile and that his precious darling naïve little Princess was a slut.”

With a roar, Castiel launched himself towards Crowley, but Henriksen got their first, turning on Crowley and slamming his fist against the smarmy ass’ jaw. Crowley tumbled like a puppet whose strings had been cut, sprawling on the ground, stunned.

“You hit me,” he spluttered. “Even Roman has never hit me!”

A restraining hand caught Castiel across the chest as Deanna finished looping the dress over her shoulders.

“Henriksen, stop.” Breathing hard, Henriksen looked shock at Deanna but held still, looming over the fallen Crowley and glaring. “I’m not a slut, you pig,” she said with quiet dignity. “Castiel has told me what you did to him. Why shouldn’t I let these two kill you? Because make no mistake: it’s only my hand staying them right now.”

“Really?” Crowley grinned wickedly and winked at Castiel. “He told you everything?”

_Do your worst. Your guess is right – I haven’t told her everything – but I don’t care anymore. There’s nothing you can say that will be worse than what she’s already forgiven me for._

“Really,” lied Castiel. Deanna shot him a gorgeous smile and for the first time since he’d made his smug appearance on the scene, Crowley looked genuinely surprised. His eyes narrowed assessingly.

“Castiel hasn’t lied to you about your gender,” said Crowley glibly. “But you are foolish to put your trust in a man that killed his own brother.”

“You killed Gabriel,” said Deanna, proving that Castiel had at least told her something. The assessing look on Crowley’s face faded.

“The knife was moved on my orders,” Crowley agreed, “but only in punishment for the crimes that Castiel reported. Did he tell you _that_?”

“Yes,” said Deanna steadily.

“Look, Crowley, you can tell her Highness my life story in an attempt to figure out what, if anything, I’ve left out, but none of us have the time for that,” Castiel interjected.

_There. Let him chew on that and figure out what I’m trying to hide – what little falsehoods and omissions I slipped in among all the truths I shared._

Henriksen took a deep breath, inhaling so thoroughly that his shoulders lifted and his chest swelled, and then blew it out in a loud rush. Tension drained from his features and he returned to his usual sternness, turning impassively towards Deanna and Castiel, his eyes still tight and troubled.

“King John sent you to Ilchester to meet with a fleshcrafter,” said Henriksen slowly, as the full ramifications of Deanna’s revealed gender dawned on him. “Obviously he couldn’t send his male daughter to wed Prince Michael. Alastair was supposed to turn you into a woman?” Deanna nodded. “But he tortured you first?”

“You saw the scars on my chest?” said Deanna, lifting a hand to her neckline in case she needed to reveal them again.
“I did,” said Henriksen. He crossed to her and put a restraining hand over hers. “You don’t need to reveal yourself to me again. I’m sorry that I doubted you, sorry that this happened on my watch. There were things your father did, things he said, that niggled at me, but I told myself such things could not be, and I did nothing, said nothing. If I’d been more attentive…” He shook his head and grimaced. “But I wasn’t, and this isn’t about me. It’s about you. However I can make amends, I will. I’m at your command. Mills will be too, once she knows the truth, I haven’t a doubt. Most of the others as well – Singer and Turner and Fitzgerald, certainly. Do you think…do you know if Prince Samuel has also been…?” He fished for a word and trailed off, letting go of Deanna’s hand. Castiel kept an eye on Crowley, who had righted himself and now sat on the floor near the fire, brushing dust from his suit with a scowl.

“I don’t know,” Deanna said. “For my sake, I am upset but I will manage. But if the King has hurt my brother…that’s actually why we came to speak with you. I wanted to send word to Sam and let him know that I’m alright. I’m better than alright – I’m happy.” She gave Castiel a smile, and he returned it. The assessing look returned to Crowley’s face.

“I will absolutely carry a letter for you,” said Henriksen. “If you can spare me, I’ll ride this very night.”

“Perhaps send one of your men instead?” suggested Deanna. “With Lady Mills gone, you are the highest ranking officer in the area, right?” Henriksen nodded. “And you believe me?” There was a catch in her voice, a slight hesitance, but she broke into a relieved grin when Henriksen nodded again, decisively. “And you’re not going to kill Castiel?”

“Absolutely not,” Crowley said, finally rising to his feet. “Castiel is my pawn, not John Winchester’s.”

“I’m no one’s pawn,” scoffed Castiel. Deanna gave Crowley a disdainful look. She was getting her equilibrium back, and it was gorgeous.

*Now that they know her secret and haven’t reviled her, she’s not scared any longer. Proud and defiant is such a good look on her.*

“I taught you better than that,” said Crowley, rolling his eyes and straightening his suit. “Winchester has sheltered you for years because he thought to use you. Why else would a King risk his reputation and expend valuable resources to protect one lowly Knight? Surely you wondered.”

“I did,” Castiel reluctantly conceded.

“Good boy.” Crowley gave him an oily smile and Castiel recoiled, jerking around to look at Deanna despite himself. “I trained you well.”

*No, I’m your good Knight. He doesn’t get to…he doesn’t…Princess…*

“Speak plain or get out,” Deanna said flatly, rising to the challenge that Crowley had inadvertently hurled at her feet. She stood tall, back straight, shoulders back, and interjected herself subtly between Castiel and Crowley, and Henriksen.

“Aw, fooled another one, have you? Poor darling.” Crowley gave Deanna an unctuous, condescending smile. “You think you’re the first that Castiel has…deflowered?”

“Crowley…”

“He left a trail of broken hearts behind among a certain…caliber…of whore’s sons and slave boys. You’re just his type.”
“Stop trying to drive a wedge between us,” said Deanna with a confidence that Castiel had not expected.

**What did I say to her that led her to believe in me so completely?**

“I know exactly what type of man Castiel is.”

**How have I pulled the wool so completely over her eyes?**

“He’s never attempted to hide that from me.”

*Or could it be, could it possibly be, that she does really see me, and she cares for me anyway?*

“He’s never attempted to sugar-coat his behavior or pretend to be anything other than a villain.”

*Perhaps I’m the one who doesn’t see clearly.*

“He’s never attempted to misdirect me.”

*Instead of persisting in this belief that Deanna is a delicate flower, I have to accept and treat her as the person she is.*

“Even when he thought to take advantage of me, he sought to mitigate the damage done by my father.”

*I know who you are too, Princess.*

“I know who Castiel is.”

*Gabriel told me to find a cause and serve it.*

“And I know who you are.”

*I’ve found my cause, and I will serve her until the day I die.*

“I never knew you liked them daft, Cassie,” said Crowley derisively, snorting and giving Henriksen a look as if the Knight was in on a joke with him.

“If you hurt her, if you act against her, if you continue to insult her, if you bring so much as a moment of shade to block the sunshine she deserves, I will kill you,” Castiel said with a lifetime of conviction.

For a moment, Crowley looked stunned, then he broke into a slow, broad smile, but Castiel knew the slug well enough to recognize the mask he’d donned. For once, maybe for the first time in his life, Castiel had taken Crowley by surprise.

*No, the second time. He was similarly shocked when I left him to join Roman. And he said a lot of the same things to me then as he has said to Deanna now.*

*He was right. Roman was exactly like what he said.*

*And now?*

*I don’t have to be that man any longer.*

“Well, kids, this has been great fun, but I think it’s time for me to toddle off,” Crowley said.
“Just like that?” Deanna spluttered.

“You promised me information in exchange for access to our operation,” said a peeved Henriksen.

“Why does Queen Naomi want me dead?” demanded Castiel.

“Ta-ta!” said Crowley with a mocking wave of his fingers, and he ducked out of the tent and into the blackness of night outside.

Castiel, Deanna, and Henriksen exchanged shocked looks. Henriksen was the first to break the impasse.

“Shall I go after him, or would you prefer to do so?” he asked.

“Let him go,” said Castiel. He was worried what Crowley was up to, but he couldn’t let it trouble him. Crowley wanted to use him, but Castiel refused to be used. With as little information as Castiel had at his command, there was only one conceivable course of action, and as a bonus he didn’t think that Crowley would expect Castiel to act selflessly. “Whatever information he claims to have can’t be that important, if he had any at all. Pretending to know invaluable intelligence is often as effective as actually knowing. Let’s focus on what we do know: King John is a predator, and whatever alliance he has planned with Vermilion came at the cost of his eldest child. If you want such a man ruling Lawrence, fine, but if not, we will never have a better time to act than now.” Castiel moved to the roasting mutton and took it from the flames. Unfortunately, it’d need a few minutes to cool before he could eat it.

I will not be used.

“But why was the King seeking an alliance with Vermilion?” asked Henriksen, troubled, staring at the tent flap yet swaying in a faint breeze. “Why marry the Princess off to a Prince more than twice her age? And if Crowley is right and Queen Naomi specifically wants Sir Castiel dead…”

“He’s right,” Deanna said, equally troubled, also staring after Crowley. “Castiel, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that my father sent you on this mission, and I don’t think it was only because he saw you as expendable. If Crowley didn’t try to kill you in Ilchester, who did?”

“Presumably, either Lawrence or Vermilion, or maybe Dick Roman, though I’m starting to wonder if he’s in this at all,” said Castiel indifferently. “Regardless, the best way to proceed would be to deal with the issues surrounding Deanna and King John.”

Nothing I’ve experienced matters in comparison to what he did to her. If Crowley comes for me, if Roman comes for me, if Queen Naomi for whatever reason comes to me, I’ll merely be reaping what I’ve sowed with a lifetime of sins. Deanna, though…

Henriksen started, and Deanna and Castiel both turned to him. He met Castiel’s eyes then looked away.

“What is it?” asked Deanna.

“So…” Henriksen took a deep breath. What did I say? Oh, I called her by name, instead of your Highness or Princess. Why is he surprised? She’s been calling me by name, and— “Are you still Princess Deanna, then, or…?”

“I’m still the same person,” Deanna replied quietly.

“But you’re a…” Henriksen shook his head.
“I am, biologically, a man,” Deanna said, as confidently as Castiel had ever seen her own her birth gender. “It’s alright. You can say it. I’ve had a few weeks to get used to the idea. It’s not so bad, I suppose. Some days, it even feels…right…like some piece of myself that was previously incomprehensible suddenly makes sense. Other days…”

“Of course, your Highness,” grunted Henriksen, averting his eyes but nodding as if he’d made a decision. “I don’t like the idea of rebelling against the King, but—”

An agonized scream interrupted Henriksen, only to cut off abruptly. Shocked, Henriksen and Castiel exchanged a glance and both moved, decisively, simultaneously, towards the exit of the tent, shoving the two flaps aside to emerge side by side bolting toward the direction the sound came from.

A familiar pinprick of light shone like the North Star framed by the dome of midnight sky that was the only sign of where the forest ended and the outside world began. Something obscured the light, though. It gleamed red as the harvest moon in autumn and a dark shape was silhouetted black against the lighter black of night, high in the sky as if held aloft by a giant’s hand. Men and women called from all around with a clatter of armaments being taken up, and Castiel and Henriksen sprinted toward the light. A hoof stomp that snapped through the air like a gong arrested them. Castiel stopped so abruptly he nearly fell, the sound rattling him to the bones, echoing through his mind like a claxon.

“Everyone, stop!” Henriksen bellowed, skidding to a halt yet feet from the unicorn. By the eerie light, its colorful mane was painted in shades of black and crimson, its form monstrous. Its eyes glowed like lustrous pearls, iridescent as the opals on Deanna’s tiara.

“Castiel?” Deanna’s voice was soft at his ear, her hand so gentle on his shoulder that he almost didn’t feel her touch through his clothing.

The unicorn turned and Castiel could make out the form impaled on its horn. Death and the lurid glow made Crowley’s features ghastly. His nose cast a long shadow over his forehead and his eyes were wide open with shock, black in the darkness, unblinking in the night. With another hoof beat like the toll of a death bell, the unicorn walked the short distance to Castiel, ignoring Henriksen and the few troops who’d arrived as if they didn’t exist. Every step it took echoed through the forest like an earthquake, setting trees rustling, branches clattering, night creatures skittering with the snick-snick-snick of claws on bark or leaves.

Stopping before him, the unicorn bent knee and inclined its head. With a wet tearing sound, Crowley’s head lolled to the side and his body slid off the glowing horn to hit the forest floor with a dull thud. The only light in the world might have been the will-o-the-wisp of the unicorn’s horn, enclosing Castiel, Deanna, and Crowley’s body in a globe of crimson that warmed Castiel through. Leaning farther down, the unicorn nudged the corpse toward Castiel, as if making sure Castiel knew that Crowley’s corpse was for him, and then it gave Castiel a look that cut to his soul. Though logic told Castiel’s that he was looking at a horse, insisted that the look was meaningless, he knew, knew, that it wasn’t. There was sorrow in that heartfelt gaze, and anger, and supplication, and forgiveness, and Castiel’s heart ached.

_I did this for you_, the unicorn’s expression said. _I did this because of what he did to you._

“Thank you,” said Castiel hoarsely. The unicorn seemed pleased; it nodded to him again, and vanished, stealing the light away when it went. The world plunged into blackness, Castiel’s night vision ruined. The only real thing left that Castiel could hold on to, the only thing he was sure existed, was Deanna, hot and close at his side. Frantic, he grabbed her hand, twined their fingers together, and tried to keep his breathing calm.
“When I was a girl my tutor told me that unicorns are the defenders of children who’ve been hurt,” Deanna whispered, voice rich with wonder. She wasn’t horrified, she wasn’t disturbed, she wasn’t upset, to have a dead body deposited ceremoniously at her feet. She was intrigued, curious, maybe even exhilarated.

Or maybe that was just Castiel?

No. Deanna’s fingers tensed on his shoulder, her breath came in quick pants against his ear. Her enthusiasm was unmistakable.

“We’ll spend the night in the forest,” said Castiel unsteadily, unable to tear his eyes from where darkness now hid Crowley’s corpse. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Crowley is dead. After all his scheming and plotting, all the secrets he’s kept and the pain he’s caused, he’s gone.

Damn it all. I wanted to kill him myself.

No sooner had he had the thought, though, than he found he didn’t mind that his wasn’t the hand that dealt the blow. While murdering Crowley would have been satisfying, knowing that the unicorn had done so was redemptive. What Deanna had said was common knowledge. Unicorns were concerned with innocence, the preservation of it, the defense of it, and, failing that, the need for proper vengeance to be wreaked on those who destroyed the innocence of others. The unicorn’s gesture was unmistakable. Castiel had thought, all this time, that the forest had accepted Deanna, but he was wrong. It had accepted both of them, seen in both of them the wounded children that they’d once been.

A tear splashed down Castiel’s face.

The unicorn destroys those who hurt the young. It could have killed me for my actions at any time. Instead, it killed Crowley. Perhaps I truly wasn’t at fault.

I was only a child. Through everything Crowley did, I was only a child. Sometimes, I think I had a choice, but what choice did I truly have but to do as he wished?

It’s not too late. I can still be forgiven for the things I’ve done. I can still be saved.

All he wanted was to be enfolded in Deanna’s arms as soon as possible, as tightly as possible, for as long as possible.

For the first time, the thought of being with her, needing her, surrendering to her, didn’t scare him.

“Come away, Castiel,” she murmured in his ear. “As you say, tomorrow we can deal with the repercussions of this evening.”

Like a child being led home, Castiel let her take his other hand, let her lead him down the path that materialized in the woods, leaving Henriksen and the soldiers of Lawrence far, far behind.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter posts Wednesday, March 8th.
“I had a crush on Jo,” Dean said abruptly in to the still morning air of the clearing.

In the bright light of a new day, the previous evening seemed like a dream. If Castiel had the courage he’d ask Dean if it really happened or if he had imagined it. Perhaps they’d never left the glade, perhaps the arrival of Henriksen and the shocking appearance of Crowley and his even more shocking demise was a mirage formed by the rainbow mist cast air-born by the plunging waterfall. As he lay on his back, hands intertwined beneath his head, staring up at the glimmers of blue visible through the brilliant green canopy, that seemed more likely than that Henriksen had spared Castiel’s life, seemed more likely than that Crowley was dead, seemed more likely than that Dean had chosen him, that the unicorn had chosen him.

There was an expectant pause, and Castiel registered that Dean expected a reply.

“Who?” he asked, turning his head. Dean lay naked beside him, languidly stretched out on the grass, one hand propping his head up, the other playing idly with the dark hairs that curled sparse over Castiel’s chest and belly.

“Lady Harvelle’s daughter?” Dean supplied. Castiel gave a single nod of understanding. Ellen Harvelle was a fine Knight. She’d never had much interest in Castiel, considering him beneath her notice, but she’d devoted a great deal of effort to seeing her daughter Joanna, only a couple years younger than Dean, trained to follow in her footsteps. “A couple years ago, I had a crush on her. I used to go to the training yards to watch the young men and women learning to be Knights. I’d sit within the castle leaning on a window sill, sighing because they were at least allowed to learn to defend themselves, whereas I was always to be under the protection of someone else.”

“You know I’ll teach you the use of any weapon you’d care to learn,” Castiel offered. Dean’s eyes widened and he broke into a slow smile.

“I know,” he said with one of his slow, breath-taking shy smiles. Rolling on to his side, Castiel wrapped a leg around Dean’s thighs to pull him close, put an arm around his waist, and kissed him tenderly. “That wasn’t my point, though,” Dean continued breathlessly when the kiss finally ended. “Of all those handsome young Knights, of all the men who – or so I thought at the time – should have excited my interest, instead I was attracted to Jo. Something must be wrong with me, I thought. Women don’t have feelings for other women.”

“That’s not true,” interjected Castiel.

“I figured,” Dean agreed. “Since you don’t have my…issues…but you enjoy the company of men. Thinking about Jo now, I wonder…I’m a man, and men are supposed to like women. If my father hadn’t…if none of this had happened to me…if none of this had been done to me…do you think I’d still be…like this? I wouldn’t have been, right? I’d have been…” Grimacing, he trailed off.

“That’s not true,” Castiel supplied gently. Dean’s grimace deepened into a pained frown but he nodded his agreement. “I don’t know what would have happened, Dean.” Castiel brushed a kiss over Dean’s lips but Dean didn’t reciprocate, though he did entwine their legs further, bringing their crotches and half-hard dicks together.
“I can tell you, though, that I’ve met people who are like you who have not suffered the abuse you have. I’ve met women who have penises, and I’ve met men who have vaginas, and they were no less women and no less men because their anatomy didn’t match their minds. And I’ve met women who have penises who were attracted to women, and I’ve met men who have vaginas who were attracted to men. Gender and sexuality are interrelated but there’s no one ‘set in stone’ way for people to be. Perhaps, had your childhood gone differently, you’d have grown up to be a strapping young man with a supposedly healthy desire to fuck the women, and only the women, around you. And perhaps you would have grown up longing to don a dress and be touched by a man. And perhaps you would have grown up with a desire to be with both men and women. Why did your father grow up to be the kind of man who forces his son to cross dress and commits incest and pedophilia?” Dean flinched at Castiel’s blunt description, but didn’t look away, a considering gleam in his eyes. “There’s no way to know, and given the diversity of people in the world, it’s not worth worrying about. You are the way you are, just as I am the way I am.”

This time, it was Dean who bridged the distance between them, Dean who brought his lips to smack against a startled Castiel’s mouth, Dean who kissed Castiel like his life depended on it. They were both panting, their hard cocks nudging together, by the time Dean released the kiss.

“What did I do to deserve you?” Dean breathed, air ghosting hot over Castiel’s cheek, his morning breath slightly rank yet bizarrely not unwelcome to Castiel’s nose.

“I wonder that all the time,” admitted Castiel, drawing Dean close to him once more. “I think I have cause to wonder far more than you do. I’m no one, Dean, and you’re—” Dean interrupted him with another kiss and there were no more words after that, only slow, loving movements. Their mouths never stopped moving as one then the other initiated kiss after deep, tender kiss. Dean flailed behind Castiel’s back, reaching out blindly for the flask of oil that they’d left nearby. Castiel delighted in distracting him, running his hand down Dean’s back, using the other to cradle Dean’s face and protect him from the ground, rutting their hips together. Delicious, hitched sounds of desire leaked from Dean at every touch, at every bump of hard cock against muscular flesh, and Castiel rumbled desire against Dean’s lips, sliding down to suck kisses into his clavicle.

With a triumphant noise, Dean retrieved the oil flask, and a squelching noise spoke to him coating his hand in oil. A moment later, that hand slid between their bodies and wrapped around Castiel’s cock, coating him with several quick strokes. Dean hitched one leg high, his hips pivoted forward, and he rubbed his hole against Castiel’s cock.

“I choose you, Cas,” he whispered fervently, tugging Castiel so that he lay half over Dean, urging Castiel into him with a leg. Desperate to satisfy Dean’s desire, Castiel reached around Dean’s body and lined himself up. They’d made love so many times of late that Dean’s rim didn’t resist the intrusion; his body spread open and Dean welcomed Castiel’s cock with a moan, back arching against the ground, hips working to draw Castiel in deeper, faster, devouring the pleasure that Castiel offered. “I’ll choose you every time, my Knight.”

“Dean,” Castiel groaned, lifting his hips to pull himself out, pressing back in slowly. Dean made an encouraging noise, shifting so that Castiel lay still more atop him, and met Castiel’s backstroke with an upward swing of his hips, keeping their bodies close. Tangled together, Castiel barely supported his own weight as he pressed their chests together, threaded his legs between Dean’s, tangled a fist in Dean’s hair and jerked him into a rough kiss. Their movements were slow and tender and languid, each thrust a deliberate expression of the love underpinning every word they’d said. Castiel found a steady rhythm, rubbing his cock in Dean’s channel, rubbing Dean’s cock between their bodies, and he maintained that rhythm as every stroke flared heat through his veins. Dean met him each time, matched him each time, accommodated him perfectly each time, low moans catching in his throat each time.
“I love you,” whispered Castiel, nipping a line along Dean’s neck and chin. “By all the hosts of the unholy I love you so much.”

“Cas,” Dean gasped, straining against him. “Harder…please…”

“No.” Castiel shook his head, rubbing Dean’s sensitive skin with his stubble, delighting in how Dean whimpered and twitched beneath him. “Just like this. I want to come just like this, want to feel you come just…like…this…” He shifted his hips, adjusted his angle, and sank back into Dean’s body again. Dean’s rim fluttered around his cock, the pressure perfect, and intense pleasure washed over Castiel again and again. He didn’t need to thrust hard, didn’t need to go fast; all he needed was Dean – or Deanna – beneath him, or atop him, sex incarnate with his legs spread, open and willing and wet and so, so hot around Castiel’s cock.

“Yes,” breathed Dean, eyes slipping shut, jaw dropping. “Just…just like that…”

The air filled with the sounds of their moans and pants, overloud in the close glade, drowning out birdsong and the constant splish-splash of water. Castiel had no idea how long he rolled against Dean, no idea how many times bliss closed like a vise over his mind, no idea why he felt in one moment like he could go on forever and in the next was spilling himself inside Dean, no idea if he came first or Dean did. When the rapture overpowered him, when he finally ground to a halt, gasping for breath, Dean clutched him tight, clung to him and shook, teeth digging painfully into Castiel’s shoulder.

“Are you alright?” asked Castiel, voice guttural and broken by ragged breathing.

“It’s so good,” Dean whispered dazedly. “Every time feel so good.” With a sigh, he collapsed back against the ground, leaving red indents on Castiel’s skin. Despite his apparently sated movement, he carefully shifted his hips to ensure that Castiel’s gradually softening cock stayed within him, and Castiel bit back a groan and involuntarily thrust into Dean again, spurting more. Dean giggled. “I’m glad I’m like this,” Dean said, reaching up to run two graceful fingers over Castiel’s chin. Come smeared where he touched, and Castiel wondered how he’d missed that Dean had slipped a hand between them to stroke himself to climax. “I’m glad, so unbelievable grateful, that I’m with you.”

“Always,” Castiel swore, the first oath of fealty he’d ever taken with the intention of honoring it to his last. “Forever, Dean. I’m yours.”

“I know you are,” Dean said contentedly. “It’s incredible.”

There was a world beyond the glade, a world with armies on the move, with Henriksen ready to help them lead armed rebellion, with Crowley dead and his knowledge of why the Queen of Vermilion wanted to kill Castiel gone with him.

In comparison to the world encompassed in the spread of Castiel’s strong arms, that world didn’t mean a damn thing.

“Deanna!”

With a joyful cry, Prince Samuel leapt from his still-moving horse, hit the ground running, and tackle-hugged his sibling. Even at high speeds it was obvious the boy had grown in the two months since they’d last seen him, but he was still shorter than Dean, and, octopus-like, he wrapped his arms around Dean’s neck, his legs around Dean’s waist, and spun them around in his enthusiasm. Castiel took a step back to avoid getting hit, but kept close at Dean’s shoulder, kept a hand on his sword. This meeting wasn’t about him, but if any of the newly arrived Lawrencians tried to give Dean
trouble, Castiel was prepared to meet them with steel in defense of his Goddess.

“Hey, Sam,” said Dean, hesitantly returning the boy’s hug. He shot Castiel a desperate look, and Castiel did his best to appear reassuring. A pigeon had arrived that morning with a note from Henriksen indicating that Lady Mills’ party was in sight over the plains, larger than anticipated, and likely to arrive by mid-day. Another pigeon had arrived, heavily laden with Dean’s gift, wrapped in a note that Castiel hadn’t had time to read, and Castiel had carefully spirited it into hiding while Dean foraged for berries in the scrub brush that grew along one side of glade. “Um…safe trip?”

Sam gave Dean one more fierce hug and then slid to the ground, landing and rocking back on his heels. There was a moment’s pause, and then his eyes went wide as he gave Dean a long look up and down and finally realized what was before him, how Dean had chosen to present himself.

“Oh,” Sam exclaimed. “Oh! Uh. Yeah. It was fine. I mean, Lady Mills and Lady Harvelle accompanied me, along with around a hundred soldiers, so really, what could go wrong?” The words poured from him faster and faster, and he looked at his hands, at the trampled grass beneath his feet, at the other people milling nearby, at Impala, whom Henriksen had presented to a gleeful Dean, having retrieved the beast from Ilchester, even at Castiel – everywhere but at Dean.

“Sam…” said Dean sadly. He took a deep breath and let it out, shoulders slumping in defeat. “Maybe…maybe would you try looking at me?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure,” Sam replied with false brightness. He plastered a big smile onto his face, so rigid it was nearly a rictus, and looked at his sister – his brother, unmistakably, that day. When Castiel had woken that morning, Dean had been skimming his fingers over his fuzzy chin and weeping.

My father lied to me for 14 years, Dean had said, and in doing so, he made me an unwitting partner to the lie. Everyone I know, everyone I love, everyone but you and Henriksen, believe that lie, a lie that I have helped perpetrate and perpetuate. I can’t do it any longer. When we see Sam, he will meet his brother. The people of Lawrence must know me for who I am, not for who King John would have had me be.

Telling Sam the truth meant that Dean now stood before his brother, the soldiers of Lawrence, and the Knights he’d grown up around as a man for all to see. Castiel had helped him shave that morning and used the razor to tame Dean’s hair into the semblance of a reasonable haircut. He wore a rough homespun shirt that lay flush over his chest, unlaced at the top to show his distinctly masculine neck and frame his Adam’s apple. Breeches fit Dean’s legs snugly. Dean had spent easily ten minutes shimmying into them, and they were tight enough that even Dean’s modest endowment made a noticeable bulge at the crotch. The only nod to femininity, the only nod to his rank, was his mother’s tiara encircling his head, short strands of hair tangling through the delicate filigree. Bright opals and nerve-paled skin made Dean’s eyes appear greener than normal, made his smattering of freckles look dark by contrast.

“I read your letter,” admitted Sam awkwardly, struggling to figure out where to look. “I believed you, obviously,” he said with a burst of sincerity, “or else I wouldn’t be here! Papa…I mean father…I mean…King Winchester was furious when I told him I was leaving, but I’d already spoken to Lady Mills and Lady Harvelle and they supported me. I, um, I told them what you wrote. I hope that’s okay. I needed allies for…for this, for what I want to do. I couldn’t just ride out here alone and come see you. Lady Mills was planning to return to the Gilded Wood anyway, and so I went to her quarters and showed her your letter. She was, ya know, upset. Very upset.”

“Let me guess,” said Dean, managing a wan smile, “she threatened to rip his balls off?”
“No, that was Ellen – I mean Lady Harvelle,” Sam laughed, some of his discomfort falling away. “Lady Mills said the more allies we had the better so we went to speak with Lady Harvelle. By the time we were done, she had to be physically restrained, screeching about how she was going to unman him just as he’d unmanned you.” Sam’s easy expression vanished, subsumed by a sickly one as he realized what he’d said, and he shot Dean a terrified look. Dean shrank in on himself, but otherwise accepted Sam’s assessment steadily.

“What did the letter say?” asked Henriksen, either oblivious to the sudden tension or intentionally breaking it.

“Basically what I told you,” Dean replied, not taking his eyes from his brother. “A basic outline of Castiel and my journey to Ilchester. The discoveries we made along the way. Alastair’s treatment of me, and his intentions. And a confession of what Papa did to me. Not just about my clothing – about…other things.” Shame brought color to his cheeks.

“It wasn’t a confession,” snapped Sam heatedly. “You have nothing to confess. Father should confess. He owes you and the entire kingdom one hell of an apology! He—”


“Thank you for coming, Lady Mills,” said Dean solemnly. With a clatter of armor, Lady Mills deftly dismounted, keeping one hand on the pommel of her sword so it wouldn’t tangle in her legs. She and Henriksen cut impressive figures, similar to that which Castiel had sported before he abandoned his belongings in Ilchester. Henriksen had retrieved Dean’s belongings and horse from their Inn but, believing Castiel a traitor, left his behind. Mills’ armor padding and undergarments were in Lawrencian crimson-and-blue: puffy striped sleeves ending in gathered cuffs, equally puffy pants tucked into their boots. A polished breast plate protected her chest, shoulder guards protected her clavicle, cuisse shielded her legs, and riding boots sheathed her calves to the knee. Dust muddied the rich dye of the fabric, coated her boots, and dulled the polished gleam of her armor to a gray shine. To Castiel’s shock, she dropped to a knee before Dean, removed her helmet, and bowed her head. Sam watched the exchange wide-eyed, nearly as surprised as Dean appeared.

“I’m so sorry, your Highness,” she murmured. “I didn’t know. If I had…” She trailed off, shaking her head. “I’m not sure what I’d have done, but as hollow as it sounds, I swear I’d have done something. Now that I do know, I will do something.”

“It’s alright,” Dean said, giving another wan smile to those seeing him as himself for the first time. “I didn’t know either.”

“How would you like to be addressed now?” she asked, looking up and meeting his eyes.

“Dean, at the moment,” he said. She nodded, her eyes wide and bright with sympathy. “Some days are…easier than others. Some days, I still prefer Deanna, still prefer my usual clothing. Is that, um…is that going to be a problem?” Lady Mills snorted derisively and Dean quailed.

“My Lady—” Sam started angrily.

“Cool down,” she interrupted, rolling her eyes. “You’ve misunderstood. Knowing what I know now? If you told me to call you God I’d be hard pressed to argue against it. You’ve earned about a
lifetime of latitude from me, Prince Dean.” Dean started at the form of address, glanced at Castiel of
his shoulder and mouthed ‘Prince Dean’ incredulously. Castiel gave him an encouraging smile. “You
tell me what you want any given day, and I’ll follow your lead, and make sure all these other louts
do, too.”

“Really?” Dean asked weakly.

“Really,” Lady Mills confirmed, eyes tightening and flashing with defiant fury.

“You’re not mad at me?” said Dean.

“Mad at you?” she echoed, shocked. “Why on earth would we be mad at you? Your Highness, what
was done to you is unprecedented. A society would shun the lowest peasant if he treated a son or
daughter as you’ve been treated. Such behavior in a King? He deserves to be flogged before the city
tribunal.” Henriksen nodded his agreement, hand clenched around his sword hilt so tightly that his
knuckles went white. Several nearby listeners also nodded grim-faced approval, one muttering “or
worse,” and even Prince Sam gave a slow nod.

Flabbergasted, Dean looked from Henriksen to Mills to the soldiers nearby to Sam, flung himself at
Castiel, and burst into tears.

“Once the people of Lawrence know the truth, few will be able to stomach King John remaining on
the throne.” Lady Mills’ was all business-like authority as three of her soldiers quickly assembled a
portable table in the center of Henriksen’s spacious tent. As if the art of war was a coordinated dance
– it was, after a fashion, Castiel supposed – another soldier burst in, Mills held out a hand, and a
huge roll of parchment was handed to her. The table was no sooner stable than she unrolled the
parchment to reveal a large, detailed map of Lawrence and the surrounding countryside. The border
of the Kingdom technically extended into the hills of the forest giants, but in practice the area
patrolled and protected by the royal family was considerably smaller, centered around the city, the
surrounding farmlands, and the Eastern Expanses, the mining of which produced the opals that were
the primary source of the Kingdom’s wealth.

“Maybe we could keep…Dean’s…situation a secret?” asked Sam hopefully, giving his brother a
concerned look.

“Not possible.” Lady Harvelle shook her head, lips pursed with frustration as if she were repeating
something they’d discussed before. “While we don’t know many details of the King’s scheme, there
is clearly something illicit to his dealings with Vermilion, and he violated the terms of our long-
standing treaty with Ilchester when he knowingly consulted with and purchased the services of an
outlawed fleshcrafter. To leave him on the throne would destabilize the Kingdom internally and
greatly lessen our standing internationally. However, if he is to be overthrown, people will demand
to know why, and the only proof we have of malfeasance is that her…his…Highness is undeniably
and unequivocally male by birth.”

“It’s too late anyway,” added Mills. “Soldiers started asking questions as soon as Harvelle and I
indicated our intention of traveling with Prince Samuel to meet with Henriksen. They wanted to
know why the Prince was going, why he’d argued with his father, why Harvelle was accompanying
us. They wanted to know if the Princess had been found and, as whispers of the truth started to leak
out through whatever channels such things always find their way into the open, they wanted to know
if what they heard was true. Much of it wasn’t. Rumor has always been the worst source of accurate
information. When people see your haircut and how you’re dressed, the rumors will spread and new
ones will spawn like mushrooms in the dank.” She paused and gave Dean a look. “Honestly, our
best option at this point would be for you to release some sort of public statement regarding the truth,
but I understand if you don’t want to.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Dean softly. “Don’t you think people will react…badly…to me?”

“Why would they?” Harvelle asked, startled. “For the umpteenth time, Highness – this isn’t your fault. Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure that a few horny young men who are absolutely convinced of their heterosexuality will act tremendously offended that they were deceived into having inappropriate thoughts about a beautiful young woman who has turned out to be a beautiful young man. However, that’s on them, not you.”

“Your existence is not something you are to be blamed for,” said Mills, giving Dean a surprisingly motherly smile. “And how you express yourself, in light of the abuse you’ve sustained, despite the abuse you’ve sustained, is not your fault. I think you’ll find people far more sympathetic than you expect.”

“You’re very popular,” interjected Henriksen unexpectedly. He appeared startled that he’d spoken, and clamped his lips into a tight, unhappy line.

“What’s your plan of action?” Castiel asked. Everyone turned to stare at him, and he scowled. Was it really so surprising that he’d speak up? He’d never been a particularly involved member of the Lawrence soldiery but, then, he hadn’t actually given a damn about Lawrence or the people around him. This was different. Obviously.

“Our plan of action?” Mills corrected uncertainly, raising an eyebrow toward Harvelle.

“Yes,” said Castiel, exasperated, stepping up protectively behind Dean. “What’s your plan of action?”

“No,” said Mills. “Our plan of action. You’re involved in this, sir Knight.” Dean looked up, giving him a hopeful smile.

Oh. Right. I guess I am, aren’t I?

“What’s our plan of action?” he said, trying the phrasing out. It felt weird to be involved, to not be on the outside looking in, to have a say. When he’d worked with Roman and Crowley, he’d been a servant. He’d been given orders and he’d followed them, regardless of how he felt about the situation, regardless of whether he thought their intended course was wise or foolish. The same was true of his time in Lawrence, with the addition that he genuinely didn’t care. Lawrence wasn’t really his home; Lawrencians weren’t really his people. He had zero investment in their well-being, zero interest in their concerns.

Dean’s hopeful smile broke into an adoring grin that lit his eyes, and Castiel swallowed hard, so dazzled he had to look away. There was no place better to shift his gaze, though. Everyone was still looking at him.

“What?” he asked flatly.

“Nothing,” said Mills, shaking her head.

“Bull,” Henriksen spat. “Knight, I’ve known you for 9 years and I don’t even know your last name. I literally don’t know what to call you aside from ‘sir Knight’ or the over-familiar ‘Castiel.’ What we’re discussing here is treason, pure and simple, and the only thing I’ve ever seen you give a damn about was whether we’d be having mutton or beef for dinner. So forgive us if we’re little skeptical of your motives and investment.”
“Don’t speak about him like that!” Dean said angrily.

“With all due respect to your feelings and judgment, Highness, you are young and impressionable,” Harvelle said. “I doubt you knew Sir Castiel well before this, but he’s not exactly a shining example of nobility.”

“I’m aware,” Dean said, staring coldly at the others in the room. Sam had the modesty to look ashamed and avoid his sibling’s gaze, but Henriksen, Harvelle, and Mills met Dean’s glare unapologetically. “How many times must I prove that the wool hasn’t been pulled over my eyes? Castiel hasn’t deceived me. In fact, he was an ass to me.”

“And yet you care for him?”

“This is a fine interrogation,” snapped Castiel. “I thought it was me you were demeaning, not Dean. And as to your assessment of me, you’re absolutely right. I don’t give a good God damn about Lawrence, I never have, and I doubt I ever will. I’m a sword for hire, no questions asked. My loyalty was on sale to the highest bidder willing to protect me from Crowley and Dick Roman, who, if you’re unfamiliar with the names, are – were – two of the highest profile criminals in Bootbock and my former employers. As to my last name, I don’t have one. I’m an orphan, and, as Crowley made clear before his untimely demise, he raised me. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of, but I’ve always believed that pride was a virtue best saved for those who didn’t have anything more important to distract themselves with. I was too concerned with not starving to death and not getting murdered in my sleep to care a whit for pride. I was too busy surviving to have any room for dignity, or ethics, or morality, or nobility. I did what I had to do. Despite what you may think, had you been in my position I’ve no doubt you’d have done the same.”

“Great,” Henriksen sneered. “So we can expect you to sell us out to the King the moment he makes you a better offer?”

“No.” Castiel’s voice was steady, his gaze calm, and he stared Henriksen down. Defiant, the other Knight met his eyes and refused to back down. “There is no better offer. There will never be a better offer. Dean is…Dean is everything. If he asks me to kill for him, I’ll do so. If he asks me to hammer my sword into a plowshare, I’ll reap for him. If he sends me away, I’ll go. If he asks me to stay, I’ll stay forever. The only reason I’ve not yet ridden to Lawrence and beheaded your disgusting excuse for a King is that Dean asked me not to. You are loyal to Dean, but I love him, and, somehow, he loves me, and honestly I couldn’t possibly care less what your opinion of me is. If Dean trusts me, that’s enough. I’ll go where he points and follow where he leads, to whatever end.”

Stunned silence greeted Castiel’s speech, and as he looked around at those around him each gaze fell away.

Dean leapt to his feet and kissed him passionately. Shock stilled Castiel’s lips the first moment, and then he melted against Dean, kissed him back, wrapped an arm around the small of his back and drew their bodies together.

Someone in the room coughed awkwardly. Breathing hard, Dean pulled away, eyes twinkling, a mischievous smile twisting his lips.

“Well, then,” said Mills. Dean moved to sit down again, but Castiel refused to release the arm around his waist. Castiel pulled their bodies together and glared a challenge at everyone in the tent.

“I’m happy for you,” Sam chimed in with a shy smile at odds with the wide-eyed way he looked from his sibling to Castiel.
“I think we should march the forces we’ve assembled south overland, swing around the city, gather what troops we can from the fortresses edging the Eastern Expanses, and then march on the Lawrence,” Harvelle said abruptly, pointing out the route on her map.

“That’ll take a lot of time,” Henriksen objected.

“Half my personal retinue is still in Lawrence,” Sam pointed out. “I’ve not the least doubt they’ll follow me, even if I don’t tell them what happened. If Dean is willing to speak to them about the King’s behavior? They’ll flock to our banner.”

“Which banner do we want to fly?” asked Mills.

Silence greeted the question, no one prepared to answer the unspoken subtext it suggested: on whose behalf were they fomenting insurrection? Dean’s or Sam’s?

“I don’t want to rule Lawrence,” Dean finally admitted, soft voice loud in the quiet confines of the tent.

“But Dean—” Sam began.

“I don’t,” interrupted Dean in a tone that brooked no argument. “I can’t ask the people to follow someone whom they will be expected to address as Queen one day and King the next.”

“But—”

“More than that,” Dean overrode Sam’s second attempt to interject, stubbornly pressing on. “I don’t want to rule. My whole life I’ve been groomed for a gilded cage.” Groomed for more than that… damn the King. “My father stewarded me through my childhood, but he made sure I knew that there’d come a day when my care would be passed to my husband. There was to be no break, no moment when I cared for myself—he would be responsible for me, and then my husband would be responsible for me. He never once asked what I wanted, and all I wished was to please him—to be a dutiful daughter, to bring honor to Lawrence, to make him proud of me.” He gave Castiel a look as the word proud fell scornfully from his lips. “And then I learned that most everything he told me was a lie, perpetuated so that he could use me for his own ends. I don’t even know who I am. I’ve had no education on statesmanship. How could I possibly lead? Sammy, you have been educated to rule Lawrence since you were born, whereas I have been educated to be an attractive ornament, guaranteed to bring beauty to whatever throne room, ball, or lawn I might find myself on. This is your place, Sam.”

“Prince Samuel isn’t of age,” Mills pointed out.

“One of you can be his Regent,” Dean said dismissively.

“If we’re overthrowing our father on your behalf, you should lead us!” declared Sam. He petulantly stomped his foot.

“No,” said Dean. “I’ll ride with you, brother, and if Castiel follows through on his promise to teach me to fight—he’s already begun to do so—then I’ll fight for you, but I’ll not rule for you.”

“It’s too soon,” Sam whispered, staring bitterly at the carpeted ground. “I’m not ready!”

“And I am?” Dean laughed, though it wasn’t a happy sound. He shook off Castiel’s hand and crossed to his brother, taking Sam’s cheeks and lifting his face so that their eyes met. Sam scowled. “I’m sorry, Sam. If you don’t want this either, you don’t have to stay. Instead of challenging the King, we can ride toward the horizon and forget there were ever two such people as Prince Samuel
Princess Deanna. We can be Dean and Sam and Cas – and Jody and Victor and Ellen, if you want to come – and go…anywhere, really.”

“I want to be King,” said Sam, struggling to shake his head against Dean’s grip on his face. “I want to do right by Lawrence, to atone for father’s sins and mismanagement. But not yet.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean replied with a sad smile. “If I could make it that none of this had happened, I would.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sam snapped, jerking away from Dean’s hands, turning on a heel and stalking angrily across the room. “Stop apologizing, Dean! This is his fault!” He wheeled back around, youthful face twisted in grief and agony and rage. “Why couldn’t he have been the man he raised us to believe he was?”

“I wish I knew.” Dean turned to Castiel and reached out a hand. Castiel took it happily, enfolding Dean’s clammy, trembling fingers in his own. “Truly. I wish none of this had ever happened to you.”

With another stomp of his foot, Sam stormed over and caught a surprised Dean in a fierce, chest-to-back hug, forcing a grunt from Dean. “It’s you I’m worried about, you idiot,” Sam muttered.

The teary-eyed look Dean shot Castiel, lower limp trembling with restrained grief, nearly broke Castiel’s heart.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter posts on March 12th, 2017.

As a general note, I had thought that I’d have some new stuff to post shortly, but I’ve ended up with several projects that are for writing challenges, so unfortunately, I may not have anything new to post imminently. That doesn't mean I'm not working away, though. There's Destiel, Dean/Cas/Jimmy, and Stucky on the horizon!!
“Cas,” Dean murmured.

Bleary eyed, Castiel tried to blink his sleep away. The cave was dark, the bed of dead leaves beneath them soft, and after a long day talking with Henriksen, Mills, Harvelle, and Prince Sam, Castiel was exhausted.

“Cas?” repeated Dean. “You still awake?”

“Yeah,” Castiel mumbled. He tucked himself closer around Dean, cradling Dean’s slighter body with his own. Dean’s hand found Castiel’s where it wrapped around Dean’s waist and he enclosed Castiel’s fingers. Castiel painted a light kiss behind Dean’s ear and added, “So’re you.”

“Yes,” Dean acceded. “I can’t stop thinking.” He shimmied closer to Castiel, as if wishing their bodies could occupy the same space. His ass rubbed hard against Castiel’s flaccid cock and a sudden rush of blood pushed fatigue out of Castiel’s mind.

“I could—”

“Was it really so bad?” Dean burst out, pulling himself from Castiel’s arms and twisting so that their eyes met. Only the faintest of blue shadows marked Dean’s outline but his eyes sparkled like two stars twinkling in the night sky.

“Was what so bad?” asked Castiel, able to think of at least a dozen issues relevant to their current situation that Dean might be asking about.

“What Papa did to me!” he exclaimed. “Was it – was it really so bad? I know we’ve talked about this before. I know I asked before. I remember what you said then, but…but I didn’t realize it would be like this, didn’t think…I mean I didn’t doubt that you spoke the truth as you saw it but your central point was that father shaping me without my consent, not that…but no!” Dean spoke so quickly that some of his words slurred together, others coming staccato one on top of the next.

“Everyone is talking like it was a…a capital crime or something. They take it for granted that what Papa did was terrible, that I’m damaged by it, dirty, despoiled, violated. But I don’t feel like I’m any of those things. Don’t get me wrong, I feel betrayed – he lied to me and he forced me to lie to everyone else and it hurts and I’m sorting through what that means for me, what all of it means for those I care about and for everyone around me – but I don’t feel raped. But then I start thinking about how everyone is behaving and I wonder if I should feel raped. Is there something wrong with me? They, like you, take it for granted that what he did was wrong, meanwhile here I am, so broken that I’m genuinely confused. I don’t know what to think, Castiel. I don’t know what to do! Every time they start talking about ‘the King’s crimes’ all I want to do is stand up and shout that he didn’t mean to hurt me. Papa loves me! If I do that, though, they’ll go quiet and get those horrifying sympathetic looks on their faces and tell me it wasn’t my fault and I shouldn’t be sorry. I know it wasn’t my fault! But…but…” The wind went out of his sails and Dean deflated, collapsed back, away from Castiel, even as Castiel reached out for him. “I don’t know,” Dean whispered. “I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to know,” said Castiel. “You don’t ever have to know. And you can change your
mind. One day you can wake up absolutely certain that what your father did was an act of love, and the next you can wake up equally certain that what he did was a violation of your affection and trust. Heck, you can wake up sure of both at the same time. I wish I could tell you it gets easier, but in my experience, it never does.”

“Gabriel?” asked Dean tentatively.

Sadness pierced Castiel’s heart like an arrow. “Gabriel,” he agreed. “It’s been almost 30 years and I’m still conflicted.”

“What happened?” Dean said. “Not that you have to tell me,” he added hastily. “But if you want to, I —”

“It’s okay, Dean.” Sighing, Castiel shifted so that he was sitting cross-legged facing Dean. The cave was small, the ceiling low, and in this position strands of Castiel’s hair brushed the rock above his head. Dean was a shadowed outline against the cave mouth, hair a frizzy halo, eyes aglow. “You can ask me anything. I’m tired of hiding.”

“What happened?” repeated Dean.

“Gabriel was my brother,” Castiel explained. No sooner had the words left his mouth than memories crowded his mind, and he struggled to sort through them to pick out the most relevant details. Speaking of Gabriel was difficult, thinking of him even more so, and Castiel rarely let himself remember. “He was a decade my senior. We were sold to Crowley when I was an infant. Gabriel remembered our family and where we came from, but I did not. That said, he rarely spoke of them. I thought of Crowley as my father – distant, aloof, nearly impossible to please. His rarely-granted words of praise were everything to me. I sought them eagerly, curried favor in an attempt to earn them, worked to figure out what Crowley wanted and strived to meet and exceed his expectations. Through it all, Gabriel was actually there for me, actually loved me, but I took him for granted. It frustrated me that he wouldn’t speak of our past, and as I got older it angered me that he constantly assumed I would enter into his concerns, share his interests and goals. Couldn’t he see that I was nothing like him? Gabriel resented Crowley – Crowley, who had given us everything, fed us, sheltered us, taught us – and I couldn’t understand why.

“Finally, after years of learning weapons and sleight of hand and business, years of emulating Crowley in the hopes that he’d see that I valued the same things he valued, Crowley began asking me to accompany him to meetings, to shadow him through his day, to learn directly from him. I was ecstatic, or as close to ecstatic as I’ve ever been. Gabriel, on the other hand, was furious. Someone like me, people like us, shouldn’t be learning such things. I asked him what he meant but he refused to tell me. I was so angry. He wasn’t my father. I don’t think he’d ever been so shocked, he looked at me and stammered, ‘and you think Crowley is?’ as if he’d never heard anything so absurd, never imagined how…how damaged I was. I never felt more broken than at that moment. Gabriel was disappointed in me, and it hurt worse than I’d expected. I didn’t want him to be disappointed with me. Life had, for the most part, been simple up to that point. Crowley was my role model. Gabriel was my caretaker. It never crossed my mind that he was only a young man himself, that he’d never had a chance to be a child, that he’d devoted himself to raising me and protecting me selflessly and never asked anything in return.”

The first tears fell.

I’m so sorry, Gabriel. I took you for granted. I took it for granted that you’d always understand me, always side with me, always be there for me.

“That night he came to my room, shook me awake, and explained that we were leaving. He said I
should gather any things I had that I couldn’t live without and grab whatever valuables I had and
meet him at the servant’s kitchen door in ten minutes. He said I should expect to never return. Then
he left – left me alone in the dark of night in the sweltering heat in the room furnished by Crowley’s
money, the roof granted by Crowley’s mercy, the belongings given me by my father, my owner, my
patron, my mentor.”

“I’m so, so sorry brother.

Castiel took a deep breath and forced himself to keep going. “I didn’t pack my things. I didn’t meet
Gabriel. As soon as I was sure Gabriel was gone, I went straight to Crowley.”

“Oh, Cas,” breathed Dean.

“I thought he’d be mad, but he was calm,” said Castiel, each word more difficult to speak aloud than
the last. “He fetched his night guards and had them arrest Gabriel, then took his time getting dressed
and ready, had me wait for him. Only when he was satisfied with his appearance did we go to speak
with Gabriel. As soon as we walked into Gabriel’s cell, I could tell by his expression that he knew
what had happened, knew what I’d done, but even then I didn’t feel guilty. I felt good. Crowley was
proud of me. Crowley had promised me a reward for my loyalty. I was aglow with his praise. I
wanted…” Castiel shook his head.

“Crowley asked me how Gabriel should be punished.” Castiel choked up, voice thick with the sobs
he wouldn’t let himself express, had never let himself express. Dean was there in an instant, holding
him, but Castiel pushed him away. If he shattered he’d never say the rest, and Dean deserved to
know – Dean needed to know what Castiel had done. “And…I told him. And Crowley ordered his
men to do as I said. And Gabriel screamed and screamed and Crowley told me how proud he was of
me and I felt so good, Gods, I was a fool. There wasn’t any conflict any more. There weren’t any
more contradictions. Gabriel was wrong, obviously, and Crowley was right. I’d been torn between
the two of them for years and now…there was only one voice I needed to listen to. I felt liberated.
Until it was almost over. I felt guilty, then – I hadn’t wanted Gabriel to die, but I resigned myself to
it. If that’s what Crowley wanted…but Gabriel looked up, his face covered in blood, and he said in a
ruined voice, ‘Cassie, you still there?’”

Tears fell freely, unrestrained. Dean tried again to hold him but Castiel stayed stiff, aloof, distant
from the physical comfort Dean offered. He couldn’t accept it. He didn’t deserve…

“I’m sorry. I failed you. I should have told you…and now it’s too late. I’m so sorry. I forgive you.
Okay? I forgive you.”

Every word was graven in Castiel’s soul, so loud and vibrant that Gabriel might have been standing
beside him repeating them ad infinitum over the years. “Gabriel died not long after. And he was
sorry. He forgave me. I never told him I was sorry. I wasn’t sorry, not at the time. Sometimes…
sometimes I’m still not sorry. Sometimes I still think that what I did was what I had to do.”

“And you’re never sure if Gabriel’s death was your fault or not?” asked Dean.

“It was obviously my fault,” Castiel snapped angrily. No matter what the unicorn’s actions suggest…
“I betrayed my brother to Crowley. I named his punishment. Who else’s fault could it be?”

There was a long, strained pause, the only sound Castiel’s failed attempts to restrain his pathetic
sniveling.

What right do I have to be upset? I’m a terrible person. How dare I compare what I did to Gabriel
with what the King did to Dean? How dare I aspire for forgiveness from anyone? How dare I apologize to my brother’s ghost? It’s too late, far too late for me.

I’m sorry, Dean.

“How old were you?” asked Dean softly.

“Huh?” Castiel said, only half-aware of the question, lost in his memories, drowning in his memories.

“How old were you, Cas?” Dean repeated. He almost sounded…angry?

Of course he’s angry. I kept telling him he didn’t understand and he kept forgiving me, forgiving me just like Gabriel, and I was too much of a coward to give him enough information for him to draw the right conclusion about me. Now he knows, and—

“Cas! How old?” demanded Dean.

“Ten,” whispered Castiel. “I was ten years old. Gabriel was almost 20.” Dean reached toward him. “Don’t touch me,” he said harshly. Dean’s hand froze. “I can’t…I don’t…” Castiel was glad that the darkness cloaked Dean’s facial expression. He didn’t want to know what Dean was thinking, how Dean felt in the face of Castiel’s confessions. “Excuse me.”

“Wha…?”

Dean trailed off as Castiel’s movements made his intentions clear. Castiel clambered on all fours for the cave mouth, and Dean shifted away to let him leave. Fingers brushed lightly over his arm but then he was outside, Dean still within, with no sign that Dean intended to follow him. Fresh air was a relief. Solitude was a relief. Sick to his stomach, Castiel half-walked, half-stumbled to the edge of the pool of water, his eyesight blurring the glade to a wash of shades of deep blue, navy, and black. The rush of the waterfall obscured his hearing as his tears obscured his sight, and his toes splashed into water, sank into mud, before he realized he’d reached the pond. Despondent, he sank down in place, ignoring the chill wetness that soaked the seat of his pants.

A twinkle of light scattered through the moisture thick in his eyes, obliterated his vision of the glade in a cascade of glittering motes. The unicorn had arrived. It had killed Crowley for him, and Castiel had briefly felt forgiven, actually been forgiven, but thinking about Gabriel was agony and Castiel couldn’t give credence now to the implications of the unicorn’s actions.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was guttural and broken. The light shimmered, shook, darted around, then approached, coming closer. Water splashed Castiel’s exposed arms, soaked up his shirt, flooded his shoes, as waves rippled around him. An aura of warmth came close, profoundly pleasant in the evening cold, profoundly undeserved, but Castiel couldn’t muster the energy to protest. The unicorn knew him, knew his sins. There was no point in arguing. The beast approached and, to his shock, settled beside him, curling its legs beneath it in a position no horse could have comfortably managed, and leaned against him. Comfort washed through him, and despite his reservations, Castiel reached out and draped an arm over the unicorn’s side.

He wasn’t sure how long they sat like that. There was no change in the night, no movement save the stirring of the water, the flow of the waterfall, and the effortless rise and fall of the unicorn’s chest lifting and dropping Castiel’s arm.

Dean appeared. No sounds prefaced his arrival, no hints spoke to him approaching, but suddenly there was a lithe form squatting on the other side of the unicorn’s bulk, a warm hand wrapping
around Castiel’s.

“We were both children,” Dean said, clear and beautiful, voice shattering the night. “We neither of us can be held to blame for how our father’s lied to us and used us. We have nothing to apologize for. We did nothing wrong.”

“You did nothing wrong,” corrected Castiel. I did everything wrong.

“We did nothing wrong,” Dean insisted. “Though it’s not my place to do so, I forgive you, Castiel. Nothing you’ve said changes how I feel about you. On the contrary, the more I realize how strangely similar we are, the more I love you. We’re not broken, Castiel. A little confused, perhaps, but intact – strong, determined, brave, and free.”

“Free…” Castiel breathed. Somehow, he’d never thought on it before. Being trapped had never seemed like his problem. He was Crowley’s. Even when he was with Dick Roman, he was still Crowley’s. Even when he fled to Lawrence, he was still Crowley’s. Did Roman want Castiel dead? There’d been no evidence of his pursuit over the months of Castiel’s journey with Dean. Odds were that Roman wasn’t involved, was no longer interested in Castiel. Whatever use King John saw in him would fade with Crowley dead. Castiel was a pawn, a tool, but his owner was dead. He was no one’s tool now. He was free… “Do you want to go to Sioux Falls?”

“Where’s that?” Dean asked, squeezing Castiel’s hand.

“It’s northwest of Bootbock,” Castiel explained. “The two cities are always fighting; let’s just say they…see the world differently, and each thinks the world would be a better place if the other city was leveled and the ground salted. I’m surprised you’ve never heard of it, I think that Lady Mills is from there. That’s where Gabriel wanted us to flee to. He used to tell me about it. He said…”

When Castiel finished talking about Sioux Falls, Dean asked him about Lebanon, and Castiel recalled a place he’d heard of once called Battle Creek, and they talked all night about home, and sanctuary, and freedom. The unicorn never moved, and Dean never left, never dropped Castiel’s hand, and as dawn made murky gray of the deep blues of midnight, Castiel felt a strange sense of peace creep into his chest.

Castiel was forgiven.

“I’m still your Princess,” Dean said. When he’d begun his speech, his voice had shook, but the longer he spoke, the longer he witnessed the reaction of his audience, the calmer he’d grown. He spoke clearly, defiant, brave, and beautiful. Castiel stayed close by his side, warily eying the assembled soldiers and the smattering of camp followers recognizable by their lack of uniforms. Their reactions ranged from curious to disinterested to disgusted, and a few had stormed off when Dean had dragged the truth into the open, but most looked angry, muttering amongst themselves, nodding at whatever conclusion they drew in their discussions.

“Who I am, fundamentally, inside, hasn’t changed.” Dean emphasized the comment by putting his hand over his heart. “I know this is a shock – believe me when I say, however surprised you were, I was more so when I learned the truth. Myself, Prince Samuel, Sir Henriksen, Lady Mills, and Lady Harvelle do not seek to overthrow a Kingdom or change the world. We simply pursue justice. We simply aim to establish, once and for all, that from the lowest leper to the highest nobility of the land, the same rules apply to everyone. My father, King John Winchester, has violated the laws that he swore oath to protect when he assumed the throne of Lawrence. If you disagree, then leave in amity and know that we appreciate your service and aid so far, and no matter the consequences of our efforts, you’ll receive no punishment or censure from us. However, if you agree that he should be
punished for his infraction, ride with us, and may the punishment fit the crime.”

According to Sam, who was well-versed on the statutes of Lawrence, the punishment for molesting children – those under the age of 13 – was castration for men, and exile for women. The punishment for incest was exile regardless of the gender of the culprit. For a King or Queen, Lord or Lady, it was also a given that they’d be deposed, a guilty verdict proving their unfitness for their office.

Castiel very much hoped that he’d be allowed to implement the King’s punishment personally. However, he understood that, in the interest of keeping everything legal and transparent, odds were that Sir Gordon Walker, royal executioner, would get the dubious honors of publicly unmanning John Winchester.

“Who is with me?”

“Who is with Princess Deanna?”

“Queen Deanna!”

“No! King Samuel!”

“King Dean! King Dean!”

“Long live the Queen!”

“Long live the King!”

A few individuals peeled off from the group, assembled, and trudged in a disgruntled knot down the road toward Lawrence, apparently indifferent to the fact that it was a trip of several weeks, but many more stayed than departed. More would need to be said – this “Queen Deanna” nonsense needed to be nipped in the bud – but Prince Samuel had followers, he had an army, he had Dean at his side, and things were off to a promising start.

“Oh my! Oh my…my! You’re the Princess?”

A week’s hard marching had brought the army to the small village where, a lifetime ago, Castiel had first learned that Deanna was a man, first resolved that journeying with her would be fun. Standing now in the same small parlor, smelling the same delightful aromas of thick stew and fresh bread and roasted herbs, Castiel couldn’t remember how it felt to be the man who had thought the Princess’ situation lamentable but, ultimately, irrelevant to his interests. Bemused, he listened to Ava wax rapturous on how excited she was to meet Deanna, or, rather, to re-meet her now that her identity was public, and watched his Goddess.

Deanna looked every inch a Princess in a flowing silk gown that cling to her meager curves. Her mother’s tiara encircled her head and opals and pearls were strung through her short hair. She’d even rouged her cheeks and reddened her lips. She’s not worn makeup since they’d left Lawrence. Since Deanna was the figurehead for their rebellion, Mills and Henriksen had insisted that she couldn’t dress in ragged, ill-fitting homespun, and they’d sent a rider off to a tailor with Deanna’s measurements and instructions to procure masculine and feminine attire fit for her rank and station. The army was a little off-put, or perhaps merely confused, when Deanna switched between outfits and gender identities from day to day, but no further troops defected as a result of what they perceived as the Princess’ idiosyncrasies. Castiel heard mutterings about the eccentricities of nobles, but he also heard whispers that so-and-so woman in their home village had been dressing as a man for ages or that a certain well-known male farmer had a husband and children. Castiel wished Deanna could hear those murmurs so she’d understand that she wasn’t so unusual.
“Are you her betrothed? Are you a Prince?” gushed the woman, question shocking Castiel from his introspection.

“Yes, and no,” Deanna said, placing a possessive hand on Castiel’s shoulder. “He’s a Knight, and he’s mine.”

We’re betrothed, are we? What a convenient lie so that Ava doesn’t give us a hard time for sharing a bed…

“Well, let me help you up to the room!” Ava exclaimed, taking up Deanna’s saddlebags and gesturing toward the stairs as if they hadn’t been there before and the way upstairs wasn’t directly in front of them. “You should have told me the first time you arrived, I could have…well, it doesn’t matter now. I thought you were engaged to the Prince of Vermilion?”

“No longer,” said Deanna. Ava either hadn’t heard the news about Deanna or had disbelieved, and Deanna didn’t explain. With the soldiers loose on the town for one night before they marched on the next day, Ava, and everyone else, would know the truth by morning. Everywhere they went, word spread, and while there were some negative responses and maligning words, the majority of people were indifferent and a vocal minority were enthusiastically supportive in their disgust of King John. Their ranks had swelled with new recruits, retired soldiers who decided to get in on the action, and members of the various town guards and keeps-men and -women who defected from the villages and fortresses through which they passed. They’d have a formidable army by the time they reached Lawrence, in about a week’s time.

“Enough of my dithering! You must be fatigued from your journey – come along, come along, I’ll bring dinner up shortly!”

Ava was a tiny whirlwind. Castiel was exhausted merely watching her. She escorted them to the single small bedroom they’d shared before, chirped something unintelligible, and left to fetch them stew. After the dizzying activity of the past few minutes, the past day, the past weeks, they were finally alone together, and though Castiel longed to get his hands on his beautiful Goddess, strip the silk from her body and drive her to distraction, he found that no words would come, no movement seemed appropriate. Deanna seemed to face a similar conundrum; she opened her mouth, closed it again, looked at him, looked away. She settled on the bed, hands wringing in her fine skirts, wrinkling the material.

“Is something the matter?” Castiel asked reluctantly. He didn’t want anything to be the matter. He wanted them to have a few damn hours where they were awake and had nothing to worry about except each other. Life wasn’t simple, though, and when he thought about it – as he often had during the long, boring days of riding on their slow course toward the capital – he wouldn’t trade what he had now to go back to how things were before, not for all the world. He was alive. He was free. And —

“I’m sorry if that was presumptuous of me,” Deanna said softly, eyes still averted.

“I think we’re at the point that we can share a bed,” replied Castiel, laughing. She looked up at him finally, eyes wide and surprised and rimmed with tears. “I don’t understand. What am I missing?”

“I meant…I meant saying we were betrothed, and now I find not only did you not mind, you didn’t even notice?” she exclaimed. Now, if anything, she sounded angry.

“Deanna, I—”

“Beef stew!” chirped Ava, voice muffled by the door, a moment before she pushed it open and let
herself in. Castiel swallowed his words.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Deanna said.

“Tut, tut,” Ava clucked. “You don’t owe me any thanks! You’re paying to stay under my roof, after all. But if you really want to make it up to me, invite me to the wedding!”

“I’ll see what I can do,” promised Deanna with surprising sincerity.

“Thank you, your Highness! Don’t worry about the dishes – just put them in the hall when you’re done and I’ll see to them.” She gave them a knowing smile, curtsied, and left the room, closing the door gently behind her so that it wouldn’t slam.

“I don’t mind,” said Castiel into the resounding silence that followed the bubbly woman’s departure.

“You don’t?” Deanna looked so hopeful. Her mood changes were going to give him whiplash one of these days.

“I truly don’t, Deanna,” he repeated. “I thought I’d made it utterly clear that I’m yours. I don’t mean just for today, or for this month, or for this year. I mean forever. If codifying that formally as a marriage will make you happy or give you comfort, then I don’t mind. Alternatively, you can simply tell people we’re married.” Her expression was stupefied, and Castiel shifted uncomfortably, wondering if he’d said something wrong. “If that’s something you’d like?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed, inexplicably breathless.

“Yes?”

“You’re asking me to marry you? Like, formally? Really? The answer is yes.” The last word came out as a hiss. Deanna launched herself from the bed, hit Castiel so hard that he stumbled into the door, and locked their lips together. “Yes.” The tray of food jostled, soup sloshing on the floor, but Castiel couldn’t spare a hand to steady it. “Yes!” Her tongue invaded his mouth aggressively as her hands kneaded roughly up his chest. “My Knight,” she breathed heavily.

Castiel’s saddle bags clunked to the floor as he surrendered to her. “Always, Deanna.”

“Good.”

There was no more talk after that, no more opportunity. Deanna refused to stop kissing him long enough for either to get a word out, and Castiel didn’t make any effort to deny her. He’d missed being intimate with her this past week; privacy was non-existent in the camp among their troops and tents did nothing to muffle sound. He was achingly hard, and judging by the feel of her cock against his hip, so was she. Minutes went by, maybe hours; the smell of hot, fresh food faded as they kissed and kissed. Increasingly desperate, Deanna rutted against him, small, hitched noises rumbling deep in her throat.

“Deanna,” he murmured, trying to break off from kissing her long enough to get a word in edge wise. She snarled – by the Hells that’s hot, how can you want me that badly? – and crowded in against him. “Dea—” She nipped his lip. “You’ll like this!” I hope you’ll like this. “Please!”

With a gasp, she tore herself away, panting. Flushed, she eyed him like she was considering how best to take him apart, and Castiel nearly fell to his knees to reiterate how completely owned he was.

*If I’m to be a tool, let me be your tool, Princess.*
“I got you a present,” he said, voice grown low and rough with arousal. She looked surprised, her eyes slowly coming back into focus on his face. “I was already planning to give this to you tonight, but in light of…everything…it seems especially apropos.” Dropping to the floor, he dug through his saddle bag until he found the gift he’d ordered. When he’d initially opened the package he’d been surprised to find two items within, along with a long letter explaining how to activate the magic in each. Metatron knew him too well. Clasping his hands around the hard, translucent material, he rose, hiding what he held from Deanna’s curious gaze.

“Hold out your hands, Princess,” he suggested. Eager, she did so. Shifting his hold, Castiel masked his gift until the last possible moment, deposited it in her hands, took a step back, and waited.

The small, elongated cage sat awkwardly in her hands. The material was solid and tinged dully when tapped, but was perfectly clear, and the cage’s function was unmistakable. Deanna’s eyes popped open wide.

“Cas…” she breathed.

“It’s magical,” he explained awkwardly. “It has features – I’ll give you the list. If you want to use it, I mean…it’s yours regardless.”

“Is there a key?” she asked, running a finger over the tip.

“No,” Castiel replied. “It will only open for the hand of whoever puts it on you the first time.” When Castiel had commissioned Metatron, he’d described what he wanted in detail. The cage should be magical, and beautiful. He wanted it to be imbued with spells for cleanliness and stimulation. And, most importantly, he wanted it to respond to Deanna’s hand and no other. Only she would be able to control access to her sexuality. Not her father, not Castiel, not her brother or whoever she chose as her husband or any other soul.

Her eyes went even wider, bright and gorgeous, as she realized the ramifications of what Castiel had said. “Thank you,” she breathed. “Thank you!” With unseemly, unladylike haste, she hitched her skirts up. A finger near the base of the cage triggered it to pop open, and she socketed it against her cock, but it was too small when she was hard. With a frustrated tsk, she grabbed Castiel’s hand and wrapped it around her cock. “Make me come.”

Castiel had never more happily obeyed a command in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will post on Wednesday, March 15th!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room was pleasantly warm, the fire burned down to embers that cast faint light. Castiel lay on his side staring at Deanna. He’d anticipated a night of sex, but Deanna had come in his hand in minutes, slipped the cage onto herself as soon as she was soft, raised a prim eyebrow at Castiel when he suggested that he still had a problem, and settled in to eat their chilly soup. Now, she lay back, eyes closed, utterly relaxed, a happy smile on her face, her chest rising and falling with the even, slow rhythm of sleep. The orange glow from the fireplace cast her in shadow, but her new cock cage glimmered, pearlescent lights in a rainbow of gem-like colors pulsing bright and dim across the surface. Metatron had come through for Castiel. It was beautiful, and Deanna looked beautiful wearing it. The enchantment to tie it to her alone also worked; Castiel hadn’t been able to open it, yet it popped aside at a brush of Deanna’s fingers against the base where it confined her balls. They’d also confirmed that it cleaned up waste instantly and efficiently. If she came in it, if she had a call of nature and didn’t wish to remove it, there would be no issues. Castiel had requested several other features, but only time would tell if they worked.

“I want you to make love to me,” Deanna mumbled sleepily.

“Now?” he asked, smiling.

She curled onto her side, her eyes slipping half-open, and gave him a languid smile. “Right now.”

The oil flask was beside the bed, refreshed at their last visit to a store, and Castiel reached out, coated his hand, and shifted down Deanna’s body. She spread her legs in anticipation, smiling down at him, her expression illuminated by the light of the cage, different colors gleaming deep in her night-dark eyes.

“Thank you for letting me take care of you,” he breathed against the smooth skin of her shaved leg.

Deanna shuddered and lay back, hitching her hips to give him access to her puckered hole. He slid two fingers into her easily and slowly pumped them in and out, spreading lubricant within her. As he moved, unhurried, to prepare her, he kissed her soft skin, tongued the hard nub at her ankle, licked a line up the inside of her calf. With a content sigh, she went limp against the bed, leg listing to one side as she opened for him.

Finally, I have the time to worship my Goddess as she deserves…

Deanna never needed much preparation. She was used to being penetrated, comfortable with it, eager for it. When they were hurried, exposed, endangered, that had been convenient, but now that they had time Castiel wanted to move slowly, get her so loose and open that slipping into her would feel like returning home.

Even more so than it already does.

She’d shaved most of her body that morning at their camp site, using a basin of water and their sharp razor to scour the hair from her legs, crotch, chin, chest, even her arms. Repressing the growth of her hair was not a feature that Castiel had asked for in her new cage. If it grew, she had the choice to present herself as male even while wearing the cage, and she increasingly seemed to take pleasure in the act of sheering herself bare. Castiel had picked up a lotion that she delightedly used to massage
the tender skin afterwards, ensuring that it stayed soft. Kissing up her leg, sucking small bruises into her thigh as he gently thrust into her and spread her sensitive hole open, Castiel delighted in how she felt, delighted in every tremble and gasp he drew from her, delighted in the faint smell of chamomile that clung about her skin and crotch.

“Can I be your husband?” she breathed, twitching against him. “Is that legal?”

“Your brother will be King,” Castiel mouthed into the muscles of her leg, nipping at the taut flesh. “I can’t imagine it will be a problem.” His finger flicked over the nub within her channel and she tensed and hissed, legs clamping about his head.

“Right there,” she managed through clenched teeth.

“You could be my wife, too,” he added, licking at the juncture between her skin and the cock cage. His cock was hard, arousal buzzing through him intoxicatingly, but there was no urgency. Within a week, they’d be at Lawrence. Though Castiel had shared none of his fears with Deanna, he had to consider the chances that they’d actually succeed at overthrowing the King. The odds weren’t in their favor. This might be their last night together. No matter what happened, Castiel suspected Deanna would survive. As disgusted as the idea made him, King John would likely reclaim what he considered rightfully his, and while that was a terrible fate for Castiel’s beautiful Goddess, at least she’d be safe.

If they failed, Castiel would certainly die. He’d fight to the death to protect Deanna from a future with her father.

“I’d like—” She broke off with a moan as he pressed against her channel again, her legs falling aside as abruptly as they’d gone rigid. “I’d like that.” For a moment, Castiel’s stomach turned, his arousal fading, as his brain connected her words to what he’d been thinking. His fingers went stiff within her, his teeth bit her hard. “Cas?” Uncertainty tinged her startled voice.

“Sorry,” he murmured, licking an apology into her abused skin.

“What were you thinking so hard about?” The last of her tension faded away as he resumed fingerling her, adding a third finger and parting them within her to feel the give of the walls of her channel.

“Dean or Deanna?” he lied.

“Deanna,” she whispered. “Right now, Deanna, please.”

“I love you, Deanna,” he hummed against her hole. She gasped and pivoted her hips towards his mouth. “No matter what happens, I love you so much.” One of her hands settled in his hair, encouraging him to lick at her more, but he ignored the tug. He painted two kisses around her wrinkled skin as he continued to thrust his fingers into her, then proceeded to her other thigh, kissing and sucking at her.

“Cas!” she gasped. “Get in me – please get in me…”

“Give it time,” he promised. “I’m going to make you feel so good tonight.” Thin pre-come made a film on the inside of her glowing cage, limp cock twitching within. He longed to suck it. Perhaps, later, she’d agree to remove the cage and let him touch her…

“Don’t be afraid,” she breathed. “We’re going to be alright…everything is going to be alright.”

Castiel didn’t attempt to answer her soothing words, wondering how she’d known what distracted
him. He focused on adding a fourth finger to her dripping hole and teased licks at the back of her knee. Every gasp that burst from her lips was a victory, every stuttering gasp a win. Her toes curled in the blankets. Her fingers dug at his scalp.

“You close, Deanna?”

“Yes! But I want…”

“How many times do you think I can bring you to climax while you’re wearing that?” he mused teasingly, massaging against her sensitive nerves.

“That wasn’t a…” She trailed off in a drawn out moan. “Not a feature!” She managed in a rush.

“No,” he agreed. He’d shown her Metatron’s letter so she’d know what her new jewelry could do. She’d given him blanket permission to activate some of the more…interesting…spells, and he had plans for later. “But you’re so easy, Deanna. Before, when we were hurried and desperate, I could drain you, what, two or three times in a row? We’ve got hours, and I’ve got you soft and pliant beneath me…” He licked his lips, licked down her leg, and cautiously growled against her tender flesh, “…and your pussy is so wet and open…”

Deanna jerked around him and a surprised sound burst from her mouth. Castiel massaged within her and she collapsed back with a deep, profound moan.

“Good?” he whispered.

“Good,” she agreed fervently. “So good.” Her hips rolled to force his fingers deeper within her, picked up a rhythm that forced him to thrust even as he rubbed her most sensitive spot over and over. He spread his fingers apart, stretched her wider than he ever had before. “So good, so good, so good…” Castiel kissed a line up her leg as she continued to chant, the words slurring together as her movements grew more and more ragged.

“I’m glad,” he rumbled against her perineum. “Can’t wait to get this cunt good and ready for my cock.”

With a stuttering, sobbing moan, Deanna came. Her hips bucked off the bed so hard that Castiel’s fingers were ripped from her body, and a film of white made the gems that beaded over the surface of the cage glow brighter by contrast. Castiel resumed his gentle kisses to her legs as she shuddered against the mattress.

“Just like that,” he murmured.

“Get in me,” she begged.

“Give it time, Deanna…”

“No!” Her hand tangled in his hair and she pulled him up. Pain tingled through his skull, and with that to ground him Castiel suddenly became aware of how intensely turned on he was. “Now. Your cock, in my…my pussy…right now.” Her other hand slipped beneath his armpit and she hauled him over her. “Right the fuck now, Cas,” she growled.

There was no way Castiel could deny that. His hard cock knocked against the cage, slid over the oil coating her perineum, caught on her stretched hole, and with a single thrust of his hips he filled her easily. The groan that tore from her as he stuffed her full was profound, every muscle working to draw him deeper.
“Fuck me,” she pleaded. Hearing her strained voice demanding and desperate drove Castiel wild. “Do it, do it, fuck my pussy, Cas…”

“Never seen this side of you before,” he said, teasing a half-thrust into her hole. She wrapped her legs around his hips, jerked her ass up to draw him deeper.

“Me neither,” admitted Deanna with a laugh. “But it’s…it’s making me feel…” She moaned and hitched her hips up farther still. “It’s amazing, so I’m going with it.”

“Fair enough,” he murmured. Burying his head against her neck, Castiel drew a long thrust out and in. Deanna curled against him, wrapped her arms around his back, and rocked into him as he repeated the movement. Being within her felt divine, and as her nails raked down his back, Castiel realized that his plans were doomed.

“Pussy feels awesome,” he groaned, thrusting harder. Whimpers leaked from her at every thrust, but her legs encouraged him faster, harder, and he obeyed. “Deanna…”

“Gonna fill me up, Cas?” taunted Deanna. Sweat dripped off Castiel’s forehead, splashed on Deanna’s face, mingled with her own and slid a wet trail down her cheek. “Gonna coat my vagina with your come?”

Of all the things to drive Castiel over the edge, he’d never in his life have imagined that would be it, but, then, if he’d been told a year ago he’d fall in love with oh-so-proper, obedient, feminine Princess Deanna, he’d have laughed himself sick at the thought of it. A groan ripped from his throat as he thrust into her mindlessly, cock aching as he spit hot semen deep into her perfect body. Deanna shuddered and moaned beneath him, writhing against his cock, drawing out the stimulation to both of them, until Castiel had to pull out with a gasp, pressing his forehead to hers. Pleasure blinded him, bright and bordering into painful, and he struggled to catch his breath.

“What was that about drawing this out, old man?” she mocked. “By my count, I’m at two, but you’ve already finished.”

“Gimme time, your Highness,” he panted. “I’ll be ready for more. In the meantime, did I mention I have a second gift for you?”

He fumbled beneath his pillow, grabbing what he’d stashed there. In comparison to the cage, the dildo that Metatron had sent was modest – average thickness, with only a few magical enhancements – but their other toy had been lost in Ilchester. For the better, Castiel thought; he couldn’t conceive of ever again pleasuring Deanna with something given her by the King. Lifting himself up, he knelt between her legs. She started to rise, eyes unfocused.

“What is—” Deanna choked as Castiel jammed the dildo into her, ignoring the thick come and slick oil that leaked out around the length and stained the sheets beneath them. She flopped bonelessly back onto the bed, eyes sliding shut.

“Plug,” he murmured. The base of the dildo flared against his hand, shaping the toy into a bulbous butt plug that held her ass open, held all the wonderful wetness within. “Just lie back, Deanna. It’ll be a bit before I’m ready again, but I think you’ll be well entertained.”

“Next time, I’m taking charge,” she grumbled.

“Sound,” he said, ignoring her. A shimmer of light cascaded over the outside of cock cage, coalesced at the tip and elongated. Deanna’s eyes went wide.

“Cas?” she asked, voice strangled. A smile played over Castiel’s face as he stretched himself out
alongside her.

“Relax,” he whispered in her ear, drawing the word out. “Let it happen, Deanna.”

“What is it?” Deanna gasped.

“Stop!”

The glow faded.

“You told me you read the letter?” he said. She nodded, whimpering, hips grinding down subtly against the plug. “Sounding was listed as a feature…and you promised to tell me if you didn’t understand anything…”

“Didn’t want you to think I was naïve.”

“I know you’re naïve,” he breathed. “It’s one of the things I love about you.”

There was an awkward pause.

“Does that mean you’ll love me less when I’m not naïve?” Deanna sounded surprisingly worried at the prospect.

“I’ll never love you less, Deanna.” He sucked the words, garbled, into her earlobe. “I’ll just love you differently.”

“What’s a sound?” she asked.

“Normally? A thin metal rod that’s oiled and slid inside your cock,” Castiel explained. “In this case? Apparently magically solidified light.”

“And it feels good?”

“Few people are willing to try it, but in my personal experience, yes,” nodded Castiel. “And given your predilections, I thought you’d like it. Next time, if you see something you don’t understand, you have to tell me.”

“I will—”

“Sound,” he repeated the command.

“By all the – I will!”

Castiel hadn’t gone into much detail when he’d asked Metatron to design the cage, but judging by the never before heard noises the toy was teasing out of Deanna, he figured his old friend had done an impressive job. Caressing Deanna’s nipples, kissing along her face, he let her sensual cries and writhing body lull him back toward arousal while the sound stimulated her cock from within. He’d never met anyone who enjoyed being over-stimulated as much as Deanna did, but given her obvious preferences to be pushed to orgasm and then pushed further still, a sound had seemed a good toy for her. He was exceptionally pleased to find he’d been right. Though he wasn’t hard yet, and it would likely be some minutes before he was, a warm glow of arousal fuzzed through him. Making Deanna feel good made Castiel feel so incredibly good.

“Ca…” Castiel wasn’t sure how long had passed when the first articulate sound in some time escaped Deanna. Her hips thrust up at nothing constantly, ground down against the plug in her ass. Sweat sheened her skin, matted strands of hair to her forehead, and she’d nipped her lower lip bright
red. Though her eyes were open, they were wide, dark, and unfocused. Myriad gorgeous colors glittered around her cock. “Cas!”

“I’m right here…” murmured Castiel. He doubted the way he was twisting the taut nubs of her nipples red, or the way he was sucking a growing bruise into her neck, was soothing, but at least his voice conveyed calm. Deanna was wound so tightly that he was worried she might snap.

“I…I can’t…” The words broke around frantic pants. Her hand lashed out, grabbed Castiel’s off-hand where it was pinned to the bed against Castiel’s side, and her nails dug in. Desperate, she fucked her hips against the plug.

“You can.” He kissed the words into her ear, sparing her abused breasts further teasing. “Relax, beautiful. Let it happen…”

“Can’t,” she snapped. “Can’t…can’t…” Castiel was going to have bruises on his wrist. If he were lucky, the weather would be warm enough that he could roll his sleeves up and smirk at the staid, upright Knights and the young Prince Samuel when they eyed the purple marks and crescents left by her nails with consternation.

“I can’t…” she wailed.

Spurred to motion, Castiel pushed himself atop her, pressing her into the bed with his weight, and lined his half-hard cock up with her hole.

“Vibrate,” he suggested.

“Wha—”

The plug within her obeyed the command and Deanna screamed, clawing at Castiel’s back mindlessly, heels kicking at the bed as she shattered. The sound cut off abruptly as her throat corded, only a high-pitched whine escaping, and her climax seemed to go on and on.

“Stop,” Castiel murmured. The extra glow of her cage faded away. The vibration – he hoped – stopped. Gasping, chest heaving against Castiel’s weight above her, Deanna collapsed against the bed as if her muscles had gone liquid.

“Next time…” she panted, “…next time…you…we test you…see how many times…you can come…”

“I’m game,” conceded Castiel. Sliding a hand down her chest, her stomach, between her legs, he eased the plug out and slid his cock in. He was still on the soft side, but her body was hot and open and ready for him. A pained whimper was the only response Deanna made to his entry. “Should I stop?”

“No.” There was a catch in her voice that Castiel took as confirmation of his suspicion that the same dark thoughts that haunted him were on her mind as well. If this was to be their last time together… leaning down, he kissed her swollen lips, kissed the grim reflections away.

A few slow, gentle thrusts and Castiel was fully hard. “Your pussy seems to like me,” he whispered. The word still felt strange on his lips, but the way Deanna shuddered and moaned, a small, helpless, lost sound, made using it worthwhile.

“All of me likes you,” she whispered. She flopped an arm around his back and held on loosely, but her legs remained limp, flat on the bed. Seeking a better angle, a deeper one, Castiel picked her legs up, rested her knees at his elbows and pressed in again, pulled out, pressed in. He looked down to
see his cock disappearing into Deanna’s gorgeous ass, stretched taut around him, oil and come from earlier oozing out with every thrust.

“Gimme more,” she suggested. “I can take it.”

“I know you can,” said Castiel, easing out once more, back in once more. Gods and spirits she felt fantastic around his cock.

Leaning back on his heels, Castiel took her ankles in his hands, lifted her legs, spread them wide apart, and fucked into her deep and slow, watching each time he pulled out, each time he pushed in. Her hole was stretched and red, so lax and open he scarce felt the clench as she twitched around him. The white film of come was already cleaned from her cage; her small, flushed cock was illuminated by the lights that flickered across the surface. The plug lay discarded on the bed, visible next to his leg each time he drew back.

“Wanna see how much you can take?” he asked, smiling mischievously. He needn’t have bothered. Her eyes were closed, her mouth agape around sighing moans.

“Do it,” she agreed distractedly. “Whatever it is, do it…”

Letting go one of her legs – it promptly flopped down to her side at an awkward angle – Castiel retrieved the plug and murmured “dildo.” It morph once more into a tapered length. Breathing hard, he ground to a halt buried within her.

“Cas…” she whimpered, reaching for him with a limp hand.

Instead of answering, he lined the length of toy up beside his cock and pressed the head of the dildo against her hole. She gave another pitiful moan as, with a wet sound, she slowly spread, slowly spread, and then both Castiel and the dildo were within her, sliding easily, stuffing her overfull. The pressure against Castiel’s cock as a second dick filled that delicious body was incredible.

“Ohhhhh…” she sighed, letting her hand drop.

“Give me your hand,” he ordered. She struggled to lift it, but she could scarce get a finger up, and her body shook with continued over-stimulation. Smiling, Castiel let go his hold on the toy, grabbed her hand, and dragged it to the base of the dildo. “As I promise, as I will swear to any deity you choose, I will take care of you, Deanna. All you have to do is hold that in place. Okay?”

“Ever?”

“Huh?”

“All I have to do ever? You come cheap, Cas…”

“For you…” he agreed, drawing his hips back, sliding his cock back in nice and easy.

Fatigue nipped at Castiel’s brain, sweat slid down his back, as he tenderly, gently fucked his Goddess. Her hand wrapped around the base of the toy, holding it steady buried deep within her. One of her fingers teased at Castiel’s cock as he went back and forth, and he was lost. She was up for anything. She was amazing at everything. She was gorgeous and brilliant and brave and she wanted him.

“’Course I do,” she mumbled with a lazy grin.

Castiel hadn’t realized he’d spoken aloud, but after that he didn’t bother restraining himself.
Devotion, worship, popped into his head, and every word bubbled from him, growled guttural and broken into the dark of a late, late night. "Our last night... "You’re my Goddess, you know, that’s how I always think of you, how I always imagine you. I’m not worthy to worship your person, your mind, your hole, but Gods I want to. I never want to stop. Never want this to end.”

“Never... always with you, Cas...”

“Perfect little pussy... look at you, taking my cock over... and over... and over... think you can come for me again?”

“Yes...” The word hitched as he bottomed out, grew higher pitched when Castiel pulled himself nearly free of her again. “Want to.”

“Good,” Castiel growled. “I want you to. I want to feel you. I want to know that I do this for you. No one but me.”

“Never,” she agreed fervently. The pressure on Castiel’s cock increased as Deanna wiggled the dildo inside herself and she moaned, mouthing something Castiel couldn’t guess. Every stroke brought Castiel closer to the edge, every word thrummed through him, emotions overflowing.

“Get me so hard,” he grunted, rocking into her harder. “Make me crazy... never felt this way about anyone... never—”

“Vibrate!” she commanded with surprising strength.

The toy’s vibration kicked on, flush against Castiel’s length, and with a broken groan he came, eyes rolling back in his head. His hips worked hard against her ass, all self-restraint gone as he chased the intense stimulation of her over-full channel and the tingling buzz of the dildo. His weight shifted without him consciously thinking about it, his cock pressed into her deeper, her body a hard reminder of sanity and ecstasy beneath him. After a lifetime of rapture he came back to himself humping her ass with staccato bumps, lying atop her, mumbling incoherent promises in her ear. Deanna giggled the whole while, delirious with pleasure. Castiel didn’t stop until his limp cock slid from her, and even then he could feel the dildo still vibrating in her channel. A few meager drops of fresh white coated the inside of her cage.

“You good, Princess?”

“Never... wanna leave... this bed...” she mumbled, hips yet rolling against nothing.

“Let me clean you up...”

‘Kaaaaay.” Deanna went still.

“Stop,” he murmured. The soft buzz of the dildo went silent. Castiel reached down, pulled the toy free, and kissed her.

“I’ll always take care of you.”

“I know you will,” she mumbled contentedly. Stretching, she spread her limbs out to give him access, and waited for Castiel to scrub the sweat and come and oil from her body. Chuckling, Castiel went to the basin of water that the landlady had left them, soaked the rag, and, memories of weeks before when he’d first done this stirring, Castiel cleaned every inch of her body.

The fire was the faintest glow, the night silent, by the time Castiel finished sponging Deanna off. She wasn’t asleep; she watched him through half-lidded eyes, a silly smile quirking her lips.
“I wanted you that night,” she whispered, sounding loud after so long quiet.

“Hm?”

“The first night here...the first night we did this...I wanted you then,” she repeated. “As naïve and deluded as I was, I knew it wasn’t normal to ask for help, knew my father would be furious, but you’d been so nice to me even after acting like such an ass, and you’re so handsome. You’re much older than me, true, but you’re not older than Prince Michael. I figured, if the Prince at 50 is an appropriate spouse for me, than surely you were an appropriate...experiment.”

“I was your experiment?” said Castiel, amused, lying down beside her. He tried to cradle her close, but she refused to move, nudging at his side instead. Uncertain what she intended, he rolled over, and with a contented sigh Deanna wrapped herself around Castiel’s back and pulled the blankets over both of them.

“I think the outcome was very successful, don’t you?” she agreed, gently kissing the back of his neck.

“Eminently.”

“I wish we could stay here forever.”

“Me too, Deanna. Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter posts the 19th of March.
The high, gray walls of Lawrence had been visible for several hours as the army approached at a speedy pace. Henriksen, Harvelle, Mills and Prince Samuel rode at the fore. Castiel and Dean rode a bit back, accompanying a cadre of soldiers who had named themselves “the Prince’s defenders” and taken to wearing green and pearly white, declaring them Dean’s colors. Their unasked for devotion made Dean uncomfortable yet he was also gratified. After initial hemming and hawing he took their presence in stride. Disconcerting to Castiel was that these men and women looked to him for leadership, similar to how the rest of the army looked to the three other Knights. Castiel had never been a leader. It didn’t sit well with him. The journey was nearly over, though, and with their arrival in Lawrence Castiel was optimistic that he’d leave his unwanted responsibility behind. Either everything would be over and he and Deanna would be free to go their own way, to Sioux Falls or Battle Creek or Lebanon or anywhere in the world, or everything would be over and Castiel would be dead. Considering the intimidating prospect of laying siege to the impressive fortifications arrayed before them, Castiel was inclined to expect the second.

Except…

Frowning, Castiel narrowed his eyes and focused on the distant fortifications.

“What is it, Castiel?” asked Dean, concerned. Something in Castiel’s body language must have clued Dean in that all was not as it should be.

“The gates,” Castiel muttered. He glanced at Dean, who looked back at him without understanding. “I think the West Gates are open.”

“That’s not pos…si…” Trailing off, Dean tore his gaze from Castiel and stared toward the city. Knowing they were to arrive in Lawrence that day, Dean had agonized over how to dress, until finally Castiel had, in annoyance, demanded to know what Dean would do were it any other day. Sheepish, Dean had gestured at breeches, boots, a tunic and a fine tailored jacket embroidered around the neck and cuffs with ivy in a motif that matched Dean’s crown. Dean had meticulously done the stitching himself each evening after the army made camp. Then wear that, Castiel had concluded dryly, and Dean had done so.

Every step of their horses brought them closer to the intersection where the broad King’s Highway met the city walls, brought them closer to the buildings and tents that extended around the city for some distance, and every step made it clearer that Castiel was right. Had the gates been closed, the city beyond would have been invisible, blocked from view by metal-reinforced wood as tall as a giant. Instead, Castiel could see buildings and movement that spoke to people going about the day.

“They are open,” Dean said with wonder. “What can it mean? They must know we’re approaching.”

“I don’t know,” said Castiel, his chest clenched tense. “Let’s go speak with the others. Troops, continue as you are!” he added at a shout for the benefit of the soldiers around them. Dean shot him a scowl and covered an ear, offended at his volume, and Castiel smirked.

Over the course of the journey, their army had grown to number nearly 10,000 – nearly a quarter of the standing force of Lawrence – with hundreds more joining them every day. Logistics were
becoming a pressing issue at an astonishing rate. In the beginning, the supply of gems that Dean and Castiel had stolen from Alastair had paid for the necessary goods and services, but those funds were nearly depleted, and the countryside larders that provided their fare were growing bare. Feeding troops on the move was nothing like feeding those encamped long term. Many farmers felt as the soldiers did – that King John had overstepped his authority and then some – and they threw open coffers and silos to supply the rebellion with wheat and livestock. However, collecting provisions in so informal a manner would only feed them for so long. If they set in for a siege, they’d need hundreds of wagons, entire supply chains, and an enormous amount of money. They had none of these things. But if the gates were open…

They’d scarce ridden half the distance alongside the neatly marching rows of columns when a rider came from the head of the army calling on the ranks to halt. Getting a beast like an army moving was a slow process; getting it to stop was equally slow. However, file by file they stilled, and Castiel and Dean quickly overtook the vanguard.

“The gates are open,” Henriksen said as soon as they were near.

“We know,” said Dean.

“We were riding up to speak with you about it when word of the halt reached us,” added Castiel

“Why are the gates open?” demanded Sam, voice cracking with youth. At many times over the past weeks, Castiel had seen impressive glimpses of the man the teenage boy would grow into. This was not one of those moments.

“What do you think we should do?” Mills asked, directing the question at Harvelle. Lady Harvelle was the eldest and most experienced Knight present, and over the course of the trip they had gravitated increasingly towards her leadership, though Henriksen technically had seniority because of how ranks were apportioned in Lawrence. King John made it no secret that thought women inherently less capable than men, especially on the battlefield, and awarded seniority accordingly.

“Take a small detachment, approach the entrance to the city and investigate,” ordered Harvelle. The others nodded and turned to Sam, who in theory had final say. In practice, he respected his elders and followed their advice.

“Let’s send Dean’s guard,” Sam suggested. Approving chill smiles spread over multiple faces. Henriksen’s was threatening enough to be frightening, but he had nothing on the malicious glimmer in Mills’ eyes. Judging by their expressions, King John would be lucky to live long enough to face justice at Sir Walker’s hands.

It took a half hour of messengers moving up and down the column and soldiers marching and countermarching before they were ready to go. As an honor guard of a hundred troops assembled, a small audience gathered: those whose attempts to travel down the road were blocked by the army and people who lived outside the gates who’d wandered over to see what the commotion was about. They watched every movement curiously, and the troops eyed them warily. When everything was set, Prince Samuel gave the order to march, and Dean rifled through his saddlebags until he found his tiara. No sooner had he placed it on his brow that the curious onlookers tittered with excitement.

“It’s Prince Samuel!” shouted one.

“Is that the Princess?”

“She’s returned!”
“What’s with her clothing?!”
“Haven’t you heard—”
“—and King John—”
“The soldiers are saying—”
“—Queen Mary’s poor departed soul—”
“—the shoulders on him!”

Amidst a growing racket, they set off for the city. As they moved among the first buildings of the gate town, more and more people emerged to watch their passage. It was yet another strange contrast between the end of the journey and the beginning. When they’d ridden through here in the first hours of the trip to Ilchester, the poor unfortunates forced to live outside the city walls had been indifferent to them, but now they assembled in droves, shouting questions and slogans. Most often, they wondered if King John was to be overthrown. Word of what had happened to Dean had definitely preceded them to the city, warped and twisted and bent and broken in the telling and retelling. Outside the city, the general tone was of support. King John Winchester of Lawrence had never done the poor any favors, was not known for benevolence or generosity toward those he considered his inferiors, and had few friends among the destitute. A growing army of boys marched behind them in imitation of the soldiers, and an increasing number of older men joined as well, makeshift weapons hitched over their shoulders. It was a recipe for trouble, but despite Henriksen’s tightening lips, Mills’ bunched brow, and the crow’s feet spreading tension beside Harvelle’s eyes, none of them made a move to deter the signs of open rebellion.

A single row of soldiers blocked the gate, ceremonial armor polished until it gleamed even on the dull, overcast day, pikes held at precise, showy angles.

“Halt,” ordered their officer, a man whose face Castiel recognized but whose name he couldn’t recall. The command was unnecessary; they’d already drawn rein. The raucous following they’d gathered grew instantly bored when actual discipline was asked of them and quickly scattered for more entertaining prospects. “State your business in Lawrence.”

“Don’t be an ass, Kubrick. You know—” Harvelle started angrily.

“Prince Samuel, Prince…ss…Dean, and the Knights Henriksen, Harvelle, Mills and…Castiel… request entry to the city,” Sam managed to declaim. Several of the soldiers standing alongside Kubrick shifted uneasily, but the grim-faced, scarred gate guard stared indifferently at them.

“And why do the royal children march on their home city under arms?” he said coldly.

_Not every soldier’s opinion has changed because of what they’ve heard…_

The thought hadn’t fully formed when a soldier at the far side of Kubrick’s line threw her tasseled pike aside like rubbish, laid a hand on the hilt of her sword, stepped across the narrow length of road dividing the two forces, and stood with Dean’s guard. Several others down the line eyed the defector, eyed Kubrick, and looked troubled. Kubrick stared murder at his rebellious troop.

“Anyone else wish to voice their political opinion at this time?” he snapped. “Remember that every last member of the insurrection will be hanged as traitors.”

Far from disheartening those among his guards who were on the fence, Kubrick’s words decided three more, who joined their fellow and glared defiantly. Another hesitated, then said, “Better hung
as a traitor for defending those who can’t defend themselves than rewarded for letting injustice stand” before joining them as well. Now a mere five soldiers stood between Prince Sam’s force and the city of Lawrence.

“Why are the gates open, Kubrick?” Prince Sam asked. Kubrick turned his angry glare on the Prince, who offered a bland smile in return.

“The King your father commands that you be escorted to his presence immediately, provided you are prepared to be reasonable,” Kubrick grudgingly admitted.

“Then wouldn’t that make the traitor you, for defying his orders?” Sam suggested. Kubrick broke into an unpleasant leer of a smile.

“What gives you comfort at night, my Prince,” sneered Kubrick. “We were further ordered to kill, should you not be prepared to be reasonable. Might I suggest you look up?” Despite not wanting to give Kubrick the satisfaction of seeing him rattled, Castiel glanced toward the top of the city wall, as did Dean, Sam and Mills. Overhead, steam rose in misty clouds, dark swirls of smoke silhouetted against the paler gray of the cloudy sky above.

“I don’t understand,” muttered Dean softly enough that only Castiel could hear.

“Standard protocol is that to pour boiling water on the heads of enemies attacking the gates,” Castiel explained, familiar as all the Knights were the defense plan for the city. “The smoke is from the peat fires the soldiers use to heat the water. Had we not cooperated – had we, for example, attacked Kubrick and his men – the soldiers above would theoretically have emptied their pots on us.”

As Castiel spoke, Kubrick gestured for them to follow him through the gates, reserving a bilious glare for his defectors and their hundred-soldier escort. He didn’t deny them entry, though.

What if this is a trap? King John might have been clever enough to seed our forces with troops loyal to him. If Dean’s guard were to turn on us in a critical moment we’d be doomed. Or perhaps I’m giving the King too much credit.

Kubrick bravely turned his back on his enemies and led them through the dark tunnel under the thick wall that separated countryside and city.

The King successfully hid the gender of his eldest son for 14 years and ruthlessly exiled or sold into slavery or had killed all those who might betray the secret. We would do well not to underestimate him.

Judging by the wary looks on Henriksen, Mills, and Harvelle’s faces as they emerged, blinking, into the dull light on the far side of the tunnel, their thoughts trended similar to Castiel’s. A crowd packed the square before the gate, and noise erupted as Prince Sam and Prince Dean stepped into view.

“The Prince has returned!”

“Long live the King!”

“Lawrence is ruined.”

“Down with King John!”

Opinions on recent events were more divided among the citizenry blessed to live within the sanctuary of Lawrence’s walls. Shouts, ranging from furious to jubilant, followed their party as they rode. Henriksen waved commands for the escort troops to surround them and help push a way
through the throngs that filled the street ahead of them. Their forces were inexperienced at group
maneuvers, so arraying them was a slow, sloppy process. Fist fights and brawls broke out around
them – between soldiers and citizens, between soldiers and soldiers, between citizens and their
fellows. Infuriated voices raised a hullabaloo in all directions, and Kubrick smirked, appearing oddly
pleased by the chaos. Castiel was disgusted, and he sighed. His reaction to Kubrick’s behavior, as
much as anything, showed how much he’d changed in the past weeks. Before he left for Ilchester,
Castiel would have behaved precisely as Kubrick did if he were in a similar situation.

“Support the Princess!”

“Take up the green and white!”

The closer they drew to the palace in the center of the city, the more tumult spread in their wake.
Increasingly, those who surrounded them chanted support instead of screaming detractio. Kubrick
remained unpleasantly undeterred and Castiel’s conviction grew that trouble awaited them.

The last time Castiel stood in the Royal Square, he had been on the King’s balcony flanking a
downcast Princess Deanna as the King made a ludicrous statement about the upcoming marriage and
pending alliance. Castiel had scarce listened, but what little he remembered – the King’s sad
lamentation at sending his precious daughter away, a eulogy to the sacrifice he was making and, by
extension, the Kingdom was making, and a veritable paean to the benefits to be reaped by alliance
with Vermilion – made his stomach twist now, knowing what he knew.

Then, the Square had been decked out in bunting in the royal colors and bouquets of winter-
blooming flowers.

Now, it was stark and bleak and swarming with people. Half the Square was occupied by an
impromptu tent camp, cluttered with crates, barrels, tarps, burlap, and more people than should be
able to fit in such a small area. They clustered around a bevy of signs: “Down with King John!;”
“Equal Protection Under the Law, Equal Justice Under the Law;” and more. The sign that read
“May the Punishment Fit the Crime” was accompanied by a crudely drawn lewd picture of a giant of
uncertain gender touching a caricature of the King in an indefinite but clearly inappropriate manner.
Across the Square, an organized assembly of soldiers and men in plains-clothes whom Castiel
thought might be mercenaries were arrayed with hands on their swords staring vengeance at the
protesters who chanted an undecipherable slogan as Castiel’s party rode out of the main street and
into the cobbled Square. The horses’ iron-shod hooves rang like bells against the stone.

The civilians that followed behind their troop took up the chant and moved to stand with the
protesters already in the Square. There was scarce room for more people; the throng was greater than
on the day of the King’s announcement. Against a backdrop of a ringing cry of “Down with the
King” chanted until the words lost meaning, individual voices rose.

“There she is, there’s the Princess!”

“Up with Queen Deanna!”

“—Prince Dean!”

“Disgusting—”

“—dressed as a man and—”

“Mama, why—”

Not every voice was supportive, and the general cacophony of conflicting viewpoints and emotions
was overwhelming. Dean grimaced at Castiel. Random snatches of conversation were inexplicably audible despite the noise, and Castiel wished he could tune everything out.

“This is rebellion! We’re all in trouble now, and—”

“Let’s just go home.”

“—and how dare King John take his boy and dress the darling child as a girl for all those years, the poor little thing!”

Castiel jerked around to see who had said the last and scowled to see a grandmotherly woman shaking her head sadly as she spoke to a young, broad-shouldered man who nodded solemn agreement. They stared blankly at the discord around them, as were many of those around, arrayed as if watching a parade or a gladiatorial battle: a curious incident of violence that didn’t involve them, a spectacle to pass a boring day, forgotten soon after the experience. The same dull expression had graced the faces of many of those who’d attended the King’s announcement. The latest events of the day, no matter how momentous, were nothing but the newest gossip, supplanted within days when something else curious occurred. But to listen to them so completely miss the point nearly drove Castiel to round on them and explain. He glanced at Dean and was relieved to see no sign that he’d heard what the woman had said.

The problem isn’t that the King dressed a man as a woman. Clothing is clothing. People can wear whatever they want. While doing so without Dean’s consent or understanding was out of line, it wasn’t worthy of widespread condemnation. But to touch Dean inappropriately? To lie to Dean about his gender? To seek to modify Dean’s body without explaining the truth to him? Those are the crimes for which King John must pay.

“What have we here, Kubrick?” The man standing at the head of the soldiers guarding the palace was so heavily armored, the faceplate of his helmet down, that Castiel didn’t recognize him as Sir Gordon Walker until he spoke. Sir Bobby Singer was usually responsible for the safe-keeping of the castle, and Castiel had expected him to be present – and had expected Singer to be sympathetic to Dean.

“The traitors have reported to their appointment with the gibbet, Sir Knight.” Kubrick’s smirk could be heard even though his back was to Castiel and his fellows.

“Hm…” Walker flipped the face mask up to reveal his stern expression, dark eyes narrowed. “I’m not sure I have rope enough to hang them all at once. We’ll have to take it in rounds.”

“Quit posturing,” snorted Henriksen, disgusted. “Your piddly force can’t stop us, no matter how many citizens you’ve deputized.” He glared at the men in plain-clothes, who stared fury and disgust back. One met Dean’s eyes and spat on the ground. “Let us speak to the King.”

“That’s not going to happen,” sneered Walker. “We—”

“No!” The King’s voice echoed through the Square, distinct even over the cheering. Enchantments on the balcony magically strengthened and amplified the words of anyone who stood there to speak. “I would hear what they say!”

Looking up, Castiel saw King John for the first time since he and Dean had left Lawrence. Castiel had known many bad men and women in his life. Crowley was cruel, capriciously using money and power and influence to make those around him dance like puppets on strings, disinterested in who he hurt while he rose to power and secured his eminence. Roman was a monster, happy to build an empire on the backs of the poor who he drained of every penny they had until they were so desperate
that they’d offer one child to slavery to protect the others. Others in Bootbock were as bad, Abaddon
known for her carnal appetites, Lilith famous for the so-called games she forced her property to
compete in, the list went on. When he’d first met Bootbock’s most nefarious citizens, Castiel had
been innocent to their proclivities, had believed them, if not good people, at least not capable of
purposeless cruelty. Yet, when the rose-colored glasses had come off, the sinners had not looked
different to him.

“Allow my children to speak!”

Beholding the King now, knowing what Castiel knew, John Winchester looked diminished. Where
before Castiel had looked upon King John and seen a man made noble and mighty by his good
deeds, now he saw someone petty and small, someone who wore the mantle of righteousness like his
absurd fur-lined cape while in private he abused his power and position to seize what he wanted. The
bulk of his shoulders that had once seemed like strength to Castiel, that he had quietly admired even
as he’d mocked the naïve moral and ethical propriety of the Kingdom, now seemed like a mask, a
carefully crafted illusion that Castiel had pierced. Castiel saw the sad sham that the King’s bravado
hid.

“What stays your tongues? Speak, I command you!” The King’s words sounded like so much
bluster; his raised arm was merely more posturing.

Is there anyone truly righteous, truly good in the world?

Castiel was damned, but he stood in the Square surrounded but those he’d once thought the best of
humanity, so innocent that they’d even shelter someone like Castiel in their midst, and saw only
those who should have known better. He glanced at Dean, who contentedly raised no objection
when Castiel did murder in his name. He glanced at Sam, who despite his fury now had lived side-
by-side with Dean for a lifetime and somehow noticed nothing. He glanced at Henriksen, who
admitted wondering about John’s behavior but had never investigated, and Mills and Harvelle, each
raising children in the castle who played alongside the Prince and Princess for years. All these well-
meaning people had looked the other way. Only now that the truth was unavoidable did they take up
arms.

“Must we have this conversation in public?” Even without magical amplification, Mills’ voice carried
loud over the crowd. As the onlookers realized that something interesting might happe but they’d
have to be quiet to hear, they fell silent one by one, jostling neighbors who continued to chant.

“Do you have words to say that can’t bear the light of day?” King John shouted unnecessarily. The
spell enhanced him to such great volume that Castiel suspected that people throughout the city could
hear.

What’s his game? He knows the truth – knows that Dean is a man – how can he possibly hope to
win with the commonfolk?

“We’d hoped to settle this without a big to-do.” Harvelle’s lips twisted into an unhappy smile.

“Starting off with another lie, are we?” John’s answering smile was smug.

“It’s not a lie,” Dean called angrily. “We’re telling the truth, we—”

“Nonsense,” said John. The crowd rumbled, though Castiel couldn’t tell if they were voicing assent
or disagreement. “If you didn’t want this to be public, you’d not have spread vile, false rumors ahead
of you. You’d not have marched on the capital with an army.” As John spoke, two people silently
stepped on to the platform behind him. In the lead was a tall woman, hair pulled back in a severe
bun, fine robes of state draped around her statuesque figure. The only sign of her age was a tracery of lines about her eyes and mouth, obvious at a distance only because of the scowl twisting her lips. Deferentially standing at her shoulder was a man, perhaps John’s age, with a thin circlet about his brow and salt-and-pepper hair smoothed sleek over his scalp. There was something familiar about him that Castiel couldn’t place. “If you didn’t want this to be public, you’d have delivered my darling daughter, Princess Deanna, to her betrothed.” His sweeping gesture took in his companions standing behind him. The man stepped up to the balustrade with a stern look.

“I’ll never marry him!” Dean cried.

*That must be Prince Michael. I've never met him...so he can’t be familiar...and yet...*

“Oh ho.” Triumph twisted John’s smile. He continued haughtily, “So we see now what’s *really* going on here. No abuse; no delusion that I’ve somehow deceived *uncountable people* for the past *15 years*. No, merely a Princess so determined to avoid her fate that she will say anything, do anything, use *anyone*, for her own ends!”

Angry mutters filled the air as, shifty-eyed, the crowds considered what the King said and somehow found merit in it.

“That’s not true,” Henriksen shouted.

*It doesn’t matter. We’re already in trouble. Half the city can hear what the King is saying, but only those near the Square can hear our rebuttal. We must seize the castle and use the King’s balcony to share the truth. If the populace turns against us we’ll have to cut our way through innocent civilians to win the day, and they’ll never trust us or love us if we do that."

“She’s duped you all,” the King continued, indifferent to Henriksen’s denial. “I know you men and women – I know my *son* – you are good Knights and true. You have been deceived by my daughter, who has herself – I believe – been deceived, deluded, seduced, *used* by the cad I unwisely chose to accompany her.”

*How did I not see this coming?*

“Had I known the kind of man Sir Castiel was, I’d never have selected him for so important a mission. You look to me as the author of all? Nay, you are deceived every one! The culprit stands among you, there!” The King pointed an accusing finger at Castiel.

*As always, I'm a tool. This time, my function is "fall guy."*

“What have you to say, Sir Knight? What explanation do you have for the people of Lawrence, the people of Vermilion, the good Knights and soldiers you have deceived, the Princess you’ve defiled, and this noble Queen and Prince who stand at my side robbed of a daughter-in-law and bride?”

*What can I possibly say?*

All eyes turned toward Castiel. Some were furious, incredulous, disbelieving. Kubrick and Walker wore matching sneers, and Kubrick ran a threatening finger over his throat. Many others were angry, but he didn’t think their rage directed at him; Henriksen, Harvelle and Mills glared disdain and disgust at the King. That was something. The three Knights were well-respected and their word carried weight regardless of what the King said.

*We’re telling the truth.*

Deep silence enveloped the city, as if each of the thousands of people who listened were afraid to
breathe lest they miss something critical. Dean dismounted elegantly to the accompaniment of harness jingling and leather creaking.

**But how can we prove it without--?**

Without anyone seeming to move, with hardly a noise to prove it happened, those around Dean made room until Dean stood alone in a cleared circle. His hands went to the buttons on his jacket and he undid them one by one.

Castiel’s jaw dropped.

“Dean, no!” he said.

Dean gave him a sad smile, stripped his jacket off, and fumbled with the laces of his tunic.

“Sam?” Dean turned to his brother, tugging on his shirt cuffs. “As we discussed?”

“I’m on it, Dean,” Sam confirmed. As Dean pulled his shirt off, exposing his pale chest lightly dusted with strands of hair and his nipples made taut by the early spring chill, his form suddenly seemed to grow, an illusion of him dwarfing the Square.

“Thank you,” Dean said, his voice amplified as loudly as John’s.

Sam’s brow was knit in concentration, his mouth constantly moving around silent whispers, and his hands traced figures in the air.

*Prince Sam knows magic? When on earth did that happen?*

“Hello, everyone.” Dean’s hands were on the buttons of his trousers. “You know me. I’ve been your Princess Deanna my whole life. Since my presentation to the public, I’ve visited your homes, distributed alms, attended your weddings and funerals, visited your sick beds, brought gifts at Solstice, led parades and officiated festivals and tourneys, done every duty expected of my station to the best of my ability. Responsibility was thrust on me young. When my mother Queen Mary died, as many of you recall, I was but a child. Papa came to me and said I had to be strong. I had to be a good Princess and do Mama’s duties as a mother to Prince Sam, as Queen to this fine Kingdom of Lawrence, and as a wife to the King.” A collective gasp like steam escaping filled the air. Dean’s voice was pained, but he was powerful, so powerful. His breeches came undone, his hands at the waistband, but he hesitated to draw them down. “You know me. If you’ve ever believed in me, believe in me now.” Scrunching his eyes closed, his mouth twisting into a miserable pout.

“You don’t have to do this, your Highness!” Henriksen said, holding out a restraining hand. Though no illusion of him towered over the city, he must have been in the radius of the sound amplification spell, for his voice carried. “I’ve seen. I’ve served this Kingdom since before King John ascended the throne. The people know me. They’ll believe me.”

Castiel looked up at the King. He *still* looked confident, and beside him, the woman who must be Queen Naomi of Vermilion stared at Castiel, ignoring the spectacle. Their eyes met and she smiled at him cruelly, tugged on the sleeve of the Prince beside her and pointed. Michael’s eyes narrowed as if Castiel were a frustrating insect that Michael needed to squish. His gaze was piercing, gathering the light so strangely that Castiel wondered if he was enchanted, or perhaps not completely human. Despite the distance, Castiel could see that his eyes were a pale, misty shade of greenish blue.

*His eyes are the same color as Gabriel’s. He...kinda looks like Gabriel. Or how I imagine Gabriel would have looked, had he lived to be that age. That’s probably why I thought him familiar – a mere coincidence.*
Castiel snapped back to the moment to see Dean give one decisive nod and tug his pants down, baring his obviously male anatomy for all of Lawrence to see. Another collective gasp sounded so loudly that Castiel almost expected to see wind gusting and swirling.

“Do any of you seriously think the real Princess would strip in the Royal Square to prove a point?” John announced incredulously.

A tear leaked out of the corner of Dean’s eye and Castiel’s heart broke. Every instinct screamed to grab his Goddess, embrace him, hide him from prying eyes, protect him. Intellectually, Castiel knew that if he moved now he would invalidate everything that Dean sought to accomplish by exposing himself. Intervening would, in the eyes of many, serve as proof of what John said: that Dean was Castiel’s pawn, that for some inconceivable reason Castiel had contrived this plot. There was a sense of the city exhaling the breath they’d gasped in; the tension ebbed. A promising, unfamiliar feeling swelled Castiel’s chest.

Hope.

Dean’s ploy had worked.

“Let me tell you a story.” John’s scornful voice pierced Castiel’s victorious feeling. “A true story.”

Another tear made a trail down Dean’s face; his head fell back, the giant illusion of him making the movement seem exaggerated. It would have been comical if the situation hadn’t been so deadly serious. “Two days after Princess Deanna came of age, I finalized an alliance with Ambassador Shurley of Vermilion. My precious daughter, my only little girl, would marry Prince Michael.” John emphasized the words by taking a step back, putting a hand on Michael’s shoulder, and leading him to the fore of the balcony. He wore a fine suit – a wedding suit, Castiel thought with disgust – in pale green crushed velvet embroidered up the sleeves and around the collar in black whorls. Expensive, bulky rings bedecked his fingers and an ornamental sword hung at his side, garishly encrusted with gems on the pommel, quillons, and scabbard. “This match would have secured her future and the future of our noble Kingdoms, uniting us in amity and love. The children of the Winchester line would rule two of the great Kingdoms of the world, and through our alliance all would flourish. It was a extraordinary, high-minded aim – one I knew that many would act to quash. We—”

“Get on with it!”

“Can’t you see he’s standing there naked?”

“Who is this imposter?”

“What happened to the Princess?”

Remind me why I can’t simply shoot the bastard full of arrows from here?

Oh right, no bow.

Dean slowly turned to look up at his father, exposed from knee to nipple, his breeches caught around his calves by his boots. Seeking calm, Castiel began to count.

One.

“I will be heard,” John bellowed.

Two.

Enraged cries rose as one person shouting gave confidence to many and a score more shouted, a
hundred more screamed their confusion. “I entrusted my most prized possession, the child of my loins, to the nefarious Knight Sir Castiel.”

Three.

Many shouted “why, why!” Castiel’s reputation proceeded him. “To protect her, I gave her but one escort.”

Four.

Fury spread through the crowd. The people of Lawrence were savvier than Castiel had given them credit for. Presented with their buck-ass naked Princess, clearly in truth a Prince, there seemed little doubt of the truth of Dean – Deanna’s – words. Perhaps sensing he was losing control of the situation, John pressed on, blustering and gesticulating. “Sir Castiel betrayed me, betrayed us all!”

Five.

A fistfight broke out to their left between the rival groups of protesters. Expressions murderous, Kubrick and Walker and their retinue drew blades and made a steely half-circle around the main castle gate. “He took the gem of our realm, more valuable than the purest, most lustrous opal, and brought her to a flesh crafter in Ilchester!”

Six.

“No!” Dean cried out, impassioned, finally moved to interrupt. “No – you did that! You sent me to Alastair!”

Seven.

“My darling, sweet girl…who told you that?”

Eight.

A sick feeling twisted Castiel’s stomach as their allies turned toward him. Dean turned last and slowest, a look for baffled horror on his face.

Nine.

“Castiel did.” Dean’s whisper carried over the astonished city.

Ten.

The moment froze in perfect clarity. Castiel stood like a man at a mark, every eye on him. After a lifetime being unnoticed, working from the shadows, he was suddenly in the limelight. He hated the way the attention felt, like pressure on his skin, weight bearing down on his head. He opened his mouth, but no words came. Dean looked so betrayed. Castiel wanted to throw himself to the ground, prostrate himself and beg forgiveness for every lie and barbed word that he’d ever spoken, every cruel twist that now caused Dean to doubt him. New tears flowed from Dean’s gorgeous green eyes as he stared at Castiel.

“The flesh crafter did this to our Princess, aided and abetted and commissioned by the traitor Castiel!”

John’s voice rang out through the stunned city and shattered the calm. Madness erupted on all sides, but Castiel saw nothing but indistinct blurs of movement. Dean was the center of his world, his
anchor, his millstone, and he watched Dean wide-eyed and willed for Dean to understand that Castiel would not do that. How could he have? He didn’t make up her abuse. He didn’t make up John’s lies.

“A skilled mage can modify bodies, even rebuild minds!” John roared. “It’s like having your very soul stolen, your memories rewritten!”

_He planned this from the start. This was King John’s backup plan. If Dean should learn the truth, if I should betray him, if Alastair should fail, if I should survive the ambushes laid for me – his plan was to reveal this mockery of the truth._

“That’s not what happened!” Dean managed. Castiel wasn’t sure who he spoke to. A roar burst through the Square, but Castiel had only Dean’s terrified expression to tell him that the noise was not in their favor. “Please, everyone, listen!” Voices rose, too loud and numerous to identify, reduced to a dull roar by the rush of blood in Castiel’s ears. “Cas?” Dean turned to him, helpless, lost, hurt, bare, betrayed. Castiel expected to hear rebuke in Dean’s voice but he found none. Dean would never say _Cas_ as a rebuke. _Sir Knight_ or _Castiel_ were his name at times of anger and disappointment. Dean only said _Cas_ when they were most intimate, when Dean was most vulnerable.

The world fell away. Castiel crossed the space separating them and enfolded Dean in his arms, shielding his front from view. He’d never been more thankful that he’d declined the offer of new armor; with only cloth covering his arms he could hold Dean near, cradle him, protect him.

“You still believe in me?” Castiel whispered. His words came out flat and toneless; only how softly he spoke betrayed how truly terrified he was that Dean would find King John’s lies plausible.

“Always, my Knight,” Dean whispered back, wrapping his arms around Castiel, shaking against him, decimating Castiel’s fear with three simple words and one ordinary gesture. “I know my mind. I know what happened in Ilchester. Whatever the future holds, there is one thing I’m sure of. I’m yours.”

“My Goddess,” breathed Castiel, tightening his hold. Dean’s trembling ceased, though his skin was still so cold that Castiel could feel the chill through his shirt.

Warm cloth enveloped Dean’s back, spreading heat through Castiel’s arms and covering Dean’s nudity. Awareness of the events unfolding around them returned. Sam stood behind his sibling, his cloak draped over Dean’s body. Henriksen, Mills, and Harvelle stood protectively between the embracing couple and the aggressive King’s men. Dean’s guard of honor, appearing undiminished in number, surrounded them, steel bared, but the fighting had died down and, Castiel realized belatedly, so had the noise. Silence had fallen once more.

Everyone was looking at Castiel.

_Again._

Scowling, he took the cloak and used it to better cover Dean, leaned down, grasped the waist of Dean’s pants and pulled them up.

“Make no mistakes, fine citizens!” John burst into the silence. Castiel couldn’t figure out why the crowds had gone quiet and still. “This man is a consummate con-artist. He even took me in!” Dean clung to Castiel’s shoulders, shaking once again, and Castiel’s last thread of patience snapped.

“Would you give it a rest?” Castiel snarled. His magically enhanced voice echoed through the Square.
Sam’s spell had made Dean audible to the city.

When Castiel had stepped beside Dean, he’d entered the zone of the amplification spell.

Everyone in the Royal Square, possibly everyone in city, had heard his and Dean’s supposedly private words.

Fantastic.

Well, they could listen to him now, too. “Lawrencians, you don’t know me. I’m a private person. I’ve been a Knight here for a decade, though, and my fellow Knights do know me. Prince Samuel, do you think I’m a charlatan?”

“Stop this game!” The King bellowed.

“No, I don’t,” said the Prince steadily.

“Henriksen?”

Henriksen stepped closer to them to ensure his voice would carry. “No, Sir.”

“Mills? Harvelle?”

“Definitely not,” Mills scoffed.

“I think you’re a selfish ass,” Harvelle said. A shocked titter of laughter ran through the crowd. “But not the sort to concoct a scheme like this. What possible benefit would you accrue by doing so?”

“I can answer that.” For the first time, the Queen stepped up to the balustrade and addressed the crowd. Her voice was lower than he’d expected, powerful and bold and commanding. She spoke and every word demanded attention and consideration. “Sir Castiel is an agent of the infamous Fergus Crowley of Bootbock, and a known associate and lover of the slaver Richard Roman.” She spoke the names as if expecting a shocked, affronted reaction. To some extent, she got her wish – the people of Lawrence made surprised noises, but none who had accompanied Prince Sam were taken aback. Henriksen had made no secret of Crowley’s involvement, nor how distasteful he found it, nor his satisfaction at Crowley’s eventual fate. As the onlookers realized that none in Dean’s party were shocked by the Queen’s news, confused murmurs spread.

“I’ve hidden nothing of my past from Prince Samuel, Princess Deanna, or the noble Knights who have stood in support of us,” Castiel replied. Holding Dean in his arms leant him calm, leant him strength. “I’m no orator and I’ll make no effort at persuasion beyond what I’ve already said, and this: consider who has accompanied Prince Samuel to the city. Consider who has stood with the King. Henriksen, Harvelle, and Mills are known throughout this Kingdom and beyond for their forthrightness and honor. Regardless of what you think of me, consider the trust you have in them. Compare that to the trust you have in but one man – the King – and his obvious allies – a Queen and Prince scarce known to us except as rulers of a foreign Kingdom – and Knights the likes of Walker and Kubrick. Where are Sirs Turner and Bass and Fitzgerald? Where is Sir Robert Singer? Surely if this were a normal situation, the Knight Commandant would be in charge of the palace guard.”

“How dare you,” the King cried. “Sir Singer loves the Prince and Princess like his own children. He was so disgusted by this situation that he refused to see the traitors returned to the city, so repulsed to see their trust used and abused, that he refused to show himself.”

“Bullshit.” Henriksen wasn’t the only one to object but he spoke the loudest and his deep, spell-enhanced bass voice silenced the others. “You’re right, Singer does love these two like his own kids.
And if he thought they were being used he’d be the first out here to cut us down. Walker, on the other hand, doesn’t give a shit about anyone. That’s why he’s the Royal Executioner.”

“Sir Castiel wishes to wed the Princess so he can carve out a Kingdom of his own!” Prince Michael spoke for the first time, voice ringing with absolute certainty. The crowd turned back to the balcony so quickly that the air filled with rustling and scuffing.

“That is the shallowest lie yet,” said Harvelle, disgusted. “Why are we still talking about this? The people know who is telling the truth now!” Despite the confidence of her words, Castiel was unsure how many people they’d convinced. Her announcement brought a cacophony of overlapping cheers and sneers, equal parts enthusiastic agreement and derisive discontent.

“It’s not a lie,” Queen Naomi replied calmly.

“Many of you wondered why I brought Sir Castiel into my service a decade ago, given his reputation? This is why,” added John.

Castiel would have given a great deal to know what in all the Realms they were talking about.

“Tell them, Sir Castiel.” The Queen’s tone was mocking. “Tell them the truth about yourself and your brother Gabriel.”

“What do you know about Gabriel?” asked Castiel, shocked. The King hadn’t known about Gabriel. The Knights hadn’t known about Gabriel. Castiel had spoken about Gabriel to no one in Lawrence save Dean.

“Tell them how you killed your own brother to further your power,” the Queen continued implacably. “Tell them how your presence here, your supposed affection for this…princess…are a ploy to secure your position.”

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

“Really?” The Queen laughed. “You expect anyone to believe that, in light of your deliberate, calculated actions?”

“What actions?” he demanded, frustrated. Everyone was looking at him again. Why did this conversation keep coming back to him? “What lies? You’re delusional.” Dean drew away from Castiel, wrapped the cloak more securely about himself, and entwined their fingers. “The attempts to deflect blame from yourselves paint you as the culprits as surely as all the proof we can bring to bear against you.”

“Proof?” King John asked, tone dripping with incredulity. “If you had any proof you’d not have brought this song-and-dance routine into the Royal Square.”

“You’re the ones who insisted on hashing this out in public!” Sam interjected heatedly.

“Unlike you, we have actual proof of the truth of this vile business,” said Queen Naomi. “Did you know that an Inquisitor is invited to all royal births to mark the infant? That way, should the lineage ever be in doubt or an imposter appear, there is always concrete, indisputable proof who the true heirs of a Kingdom are.”

“So what?” Castiel’s baffled question was echoed by those around him.

“Show the true heirs of Lawrence,” the King announced. Dean gasped as a glow enveloped him and coalesced as a shining mark on his chest, a circle enclosed in a flaming star that showed through the
gap at the front of his cloak. A similar glow surrounded Samuel, who hastily pawed his jacket open and revealed an identical mark on his chest.

“Great,” Harvelle snapped sarcastically. “We’ve confirmed for all to see what we already know, that Sam and—”

“Reveal the true heirs of Vermilion,” the Queen interrupted. A glow surrounded Michael, but Castiel only caught a brief glimpse before his vision whitened out.

“Cas?” Dean asked, shocked.

“What is it, Dean?” Castiel replied. “Where did you go? Are you alright?”

“You’re glowing,” exclaimed Dean.

“That’s impossible,” said Castiel. His vision cleared to show the Square in washed out colors that gradually saturated until the world seemed over-bright.

“Oh, wow! That’s wonderful! I love it!” Dean laughed.

“Love what?” Castiel snapped, patience finally exhausted. “This is absurd. I’m no heir.”

“You have a halo!”

“I do not!”

“You do,” Henriksen said with wonder.

Well, at least he doesn’t sound like he wants to kill me. I suppose that means he thinks I’m telling the truth when I insist that I haven’t the damnedest idea what is going on.

“Will everyone stop staring at me?” snarled Castiel.

“You’re a Prince of Vermilion,” said Sam, obviously excited thought Castiel couldn’t imagine why.

“That’s the most preposterous thing anyone has ever said to me, and I once had a vagrant inform me that I was a Chimera sent from the lowest of the Hells to plague him,” Castiel scoffed. “If I were a Prince someone would have known.”

“That’s what Crowley was hinting at,” Henriksen said abruptly, then looked surprised he’d spoken.

“That’s what Gabriel thought he should have told you!” Dean sounded nearly as excited as Sam. Castiel couldn’t fathom what either of them thought was thrilling about this. It had to be some kind of bizarre, impossible mistake.

“No, Gabriel thought he should have told me that he loved me,” Castiel spat out for all to hear the words he’d held close to his heart for nigh on 30 years.

“But it could be true, right?”

“It couldn’t be,” Castiel denied. “I’m the bastard son of a prostitute or…or…something!”

“You will speak of our mother with respect,” Michael said furiously.

“Stop pretending you didn’t know,” sniffed the Queen. “This show might convince those you’ve already enthralled with honeyed words but the people of Lawrence know better – don’t you?”
Whatever reaction she had hoped for, the confused din that answered her was surely not it. As difficult as Castiel found it to focus on anything other than the drama that had suddenly exploded everything he’d thought was true, even he recognized that the clamor was not unilaterally supportive of the Royals.

Ignoring his surroundings, Castiel focused on the one thing he was absolutely positive was real and true. He grabbed Dean’s hands and looked his Goddess in the eyes. “Is it true?” he asked. “Is there a halo over my head?”

“There is,” Dean smiled. *Why are you happy about this?* “I thought you were my Knight but it turns out you’re my Prince.”

“Dean—”

“Very touching,” John interjected. The moment Dean and Castiel shared snapped, and they turned toward the podium. “How about we—”

“Down with the King!” roared a voice from amidst the crowd, strident and furious enough to cut through everything. A stone flew through the air and hit one of the deputized soldiers of Lawrence guarding the city gate in the head. He collapsed, limp and unconscious.

“Jake!” shrieked someone else.

All hell broke loose.

Missiles flew in all directions, steel clanged on steel, more people fell, rocks struck pavement, and with a roar the untrained vigilantes supporting the King charged the crowd.

“Stop fighting,” King John said, but it sounded more like a half-hearted suggestion than a command. No one heeded him, not even his own troops. Walker and his command charged Henriksen, Mills, Harvelle, and the line of supporting troops that were all that separated Dean and Sam from violence.

“Protect the Prince and Princess!”

Castiel swept Dean behind him and drew his sword, lifting the blade scarce in time to deflect a savage jab by Kubrick. The Knight smiled viciously, turned and swung again, and Castiel no longer had attention to spare for anything other than his personal battle.

Steel rang on steel, sound filled the air, and Castiel’s boots found sure footing on the cobblestones as he stepped, swung, and parried. Kubrick was a fine swordsman, and armored, but in practice sessions Castiel had been his equal, and now his life was on the line.

*The life of a Prince?*

He shook the thought away. He hadn’t time to think on the supposed truths revealed about him. Kubrick’s blade skittered down the length of Castiel’s as the two met, glanced off the quillon and bloodied Castiel’s arm. Kubrick smirked. Distractions would get Castiel killed. Focus. There was nothing but the burn of his arms, the heaving of his lungs, the dodge and hew of fighting. Kubrick forced him back several steps, then Castiel surged forward, the battle lines around them undulating similarly. He caught a glimpse of Sam staring aggression and brandishing a dagger at a man in rags. He caught a glimpse of Mills squaring off with Walker. He caught a glimpse of a woman beating another’s head in with what he thought was a rolling pin. He’d never been in a battle of this scale before, and constant distractions eroded his concentration. The cloth of his sleeve was soaked red, dripping onto his breeches. Kubrick took a step back to gather himself, breathing hard.
“Castiel, look out!” Dean’s scream tore Castiel’s attention from the moment. The thought that Dean might be hurt in this madness trumped every other concern. Wheeling towards the sound of the voice, he froze.

Dean was fine.

Heck, there were eight soldiers in the green-and-cream surrounding him, and even they were hardly under threat, swords sticking out in all directions like a strange steel porcupine.

Dean was—

“CAS!”

Pressure hit his back, followed immediately by a familiar pain. Looking down, he wasn’t surprised to see the point of a sword emerging from his chest. After all, he’d been stabbed in the back before.

“Dean?” Something about the name seemed off in his mouth. His vision fuzzed to black.

Hadn’t it gone white moments before?

He couldn’t remember.

He should be able to remember.

Maybe?

“Cas! No!”

Dean was upset. That wasn’t alright. A heavy weight slipped from Castiel’s hand, something metallic clattered off the stone ground, but even with the weight gone Castiel couldn’t lift his arm. He couldn’t reach Deanna. He tried to talk but thick liquid choked his throat.

He couldn’t see his Goddess any longer.

Where had she gone?

Castiel didn’t know.

Castiel would never know.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry... (not sorry).

Next chapter posts Wednesday, March 22nd.
The room was so dark that Castiel wasn’t sure if his eyes were open or closed, if it was daytime or nighttime. Gunk coating his eyelids resisting his attempts to blink, and lifted his hands to wipe them.

He tried to lift his hands.

Nothing happened.

“Wha…?” he mumbled. His mouth was so dry that no sound came out. There was cloth under his fingers, warmth enveloping his body, and no pain. There should be pain, but he couldn’t remember why. He was lying in a bed, he thought, with the blankets tucked in, securing him in place. Sliding an arm up, he found he was able to move, he simply wasn’t strong enough to untuck the blankets as he tugged up. Fabric rustled and his arm felt suddenly cool as he pulled it into the open and wiped his eyes.

It was still pitch black.

Reaching out, he fumbled around, trying to map by feel what he couldn’t see. Pain jolted through his chest, spiked like fire down his right leg and up through his shoulder, tingled down to his fingers, pounded behind his eyes.

He couldn’t remember being injured.

He vividly recalled the disorientation when he’d awoken after the last time he’d been rendered unconscious. Closing his eyes, not that it mattered, he focused on calm breaths, tracing through his memories for the last thing he remembered.

…marching into Lawrence…confronting the King…the Queen and Prince of Vermilion arriving … Dean exposing himself…the implausible revelation of Castiel’s supposed heritage…the battle in the Royal Square…Castiel raised his sword to deflect a rain of blows from Sir Kubrick…

There was nothing after that.

Castiel must have lost the fight.

He was alive, though, and even in Lawrence jail cells didn’t have plush beds and warm blankets. The edges of the bed marked the extent of Castiel’s reach and he had no idea what lay beyond that. No walls touched on the left or right sides of the bed, suggesting the room was large. Carefully reaching over his head, Castiel’s fingers brushed against polished wood. A headboard. And the bed was long enough, he realized, that his feet didn’t hang off the edge or strike the footboard. He was tall; it was unusual to find a bed that fit him comfortably.

There wasn’t a sound. That was unusual, too. There was no wind, no animal sounds, no leaves rustling or branches clattering, no late-night cleaners scraping their shovels against the streets. Years spent both in the wilderness and in cities made a range of noises normal, familiar, comforting. Silence was distressing and implied isolation, suggested imprisonment despite the evidence to the contrary. If there were windows in the room, he should be able to hear something. Maybe it was daytime and he’d been left solitary to heal or die as he might, deprived even of candles. That made no sense, though. The bed was fine, well-made and accoutered in the finest textiles. His wounds were
bandaged. Based on what he could feel, an injury as severe as he must have sustained would have been fatal unless emergency treatment was administered. An Inquisitor was probably involved, as well as a doctor, both professionals, both expensive, neither likely to be called for a prisoner.

*If my injury was severe enough perhaps they thought restraints were unnecessary...*

Where was Deanna?

Alarm saturated his senses, washed his vision red, and he tried to sit up. A flare of pain forced an agonized gasp from his parched throat. Whimpering gutturally, he collapsed back.

*Would they call a doctor and an Inquisitor if the injured man was a Prince? Or at least believed to be a Prince?*

Nothing about Queen Naomi’s story made sense. Granted, she knew Gabriel’s name. Granted, she knew about Crowley. Granted, Gabriel had said things that implied that there was more to Castiel’s life than what he knew. Granted, Crowley had heavy-handedly taunted that he knew things about Castiel that Castiel didn’t know about himself, and had mentioned that Queen Naomi wanted Castiel dead even though so far as Castiel knew his existence was irrelevant to the royalty of Vermilion.

That was meager evidence on which to believe the preposterous. If he’d not manifest the same halo as Michael he’d have laughed their assertion off as a complete absurdity despite the scant teasing hints.

No explanation had been given as to why he and Gabriel had been sent to live with Crowley. No explanation had been given as to why Castiel was kept in the dark. No explanation had been given of why no one came to find him until now. No one had offered a single reason that the Queen – supposedly Castiel’s *mother!* – wanted Castiel dead. Castiel wasn’t naïve – a parent wasn’t necessarily an endless font of love and support for their child. He need look no further than John Winchester for proof of that. Nonetheless, the Queen had stood on the balcony over the Royal Square and helped the King enact a plan that, if successfully, would have ended in Castiel’s execution.

Naomi’s indifference didn’t surprise him. Castiel’s parents, whoever they were, had sold him to Crowley when he was an infant. *Obviously* his parents were indifferent to him. He’d always known that, grown up keenly aware of it. His adolescent fantasies of a happy family life had never included a homecoming. When he’d been young and foolish enough to believe he might find a place where he belonged, he’d dreamed of the life he’d build, not of returning to those who had forsaken him.

*Except maybe they weren’t only fantasies.*

*Deanna.*

Tension tightened Castiel’s chest, shuddered pain through him in jagged arcs. The blood flowing through him felt over-heated, and it occurred to him for the first time that he might be running a fever. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he was dying. Maybe he’d never see Deanna again.

His eyes flooded with tears.

Some small, cynical part of him spewed mocking words to see him so cloyingly besotted by the young man. What was so great about Deanna? She was confused, abused and hurt, emotionally needy and distressingly naïve. Deanna had trusted her father so completely she’d not even questioned her abuse, been so cloistered that she’d somehow reached adulthood without realizing she had the wrong anatomy, so sheltered that she’d actually thought her cock was a vagina. She’d
pushed the limits imposed on her so minimally that she’d believed every lie she’d ever been fed. What appeal could such a child have for Castiel?

Her smile. Her strength. Her curiosity. Her intellect. Her determination to understand herself. Her quiet, caring acceptance of every horror Castiel had laid bare. The quirk of her lips with the hint of a smile when Castiel killed for her. The sounds she made when she was touched tenderly. Her heavy breaths when Castiel fucked her. Her hands on Castiel’s skin. Her astute questions and determination to understand the world so long hidden from her.

Castiel wanted Deanna. He wanted to explore with Deanna. He wanted to bring Deanna pleasure, and wanted Deanna to bring him pleasure. He wanted to lie beside Deanna and talk throughout the night. He wanted to show Deanna the world. He wanted to see the world through Deanna’s eyes, to notice all the beautiful and interesting things that had been beneath Castiel’s calloused attention the first time he’d traveled.

Castiel wanted to be a man that deserved Deanna.

A tear leaked from Castiel’s eye, *obviously* caused by the continued pain of his wounds, and he forced himself to lie back, to relax muscle by muscle, until the agony caused by the mysterious injury to his chest ceased to throttle him. If he further injured himself and ended up bleeding to death alone in this bed he’d never know what had happened to his Goddess. Eventually, someone would have to check on him – a doctor, an Inquisitor, a jailor, a cook, *someone* – and then if he were lucky they’d answer his questions about Deanna.

Tears made tracks as they fell from the corners of his eyes, blessedly cool against the heat of his skin, and Castiel tried to will away the ache in his heart in the same way he’d quelled the pain in his chest.

Castiel couldn’t have said how much time had passed, though he didn’t think it was much, when a click and a rattle had him on high alert. A sliver of light, shockingly bright after unknown hours in oppressive darkness, grew into a large rectangle as the door was pushed open. The smell of rich broth filled the air and finally brought some moisture to Castiel’s mouth. Soft humming accompanied the bouncing candle that bobbed and bounced as it was carried on something unsteady. Castiel’s dazzled vision showed him little else.

“Tears made tracks as they fell from the corners of his eyes, blessedly cool against the heat of his skin, and Castiel tried to will away the ache in his heart in the same way he’d quelled the pain in his chest.

“I’m sorry I was gone so long,” murmured an unmistakable voice in a sing-songy tone that suggested the speaker had no thought of actually being heard.

“Deanna?” Castiel croaked. It sounded more like “d-na” but at least sound came out.

“Cas!”

Castiel’s sight cleared. Deanna wore a simple though well-made dress and carried a large tray on which she balanced a candle, a tankard, and a bowl oozing steam that made a halo of the candle light. Broth sloshed from the bowl as she hurried over to him and set it down with a thunk on a table placed beside the bed. The room was nice, though modestly appointed. Plaster painted with garden scenes covered the walls and simple, blocky wooden furniture made a bland ensemble that screamed ‘guest room.’

“I didn’t wake you, did I?” asked Deanna nervously, setting a warm hand on his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Thirsty.”

“Oh!” With a flush, she turned, grabbed the tankard, slipped an arm under Castiel’s neck, and helped
him sit up enough to drink. Cool, fresh water coated his mouth and seeped gloriously down his throat.

“Thank you.”

There was a beat of awkward silence.

“Are you hungry?” she asked solicitously. “I’ve brought soup. The Inquisitor said that you should take your medicine with soup. The broth will obscure the flavor of the bitter herbs. I’m so glad you’re awake; it’s been days and days and I was afraid that you’d never regain consciousness. The doctor said I was overreacting but there was so much blood and—”

“Breathe, Deanna!” Castiel barked. Deanna squeaked and dropped Castiel’s head back onto his plush pillow, sloshing water over his cheeks and neck.

“I’m sorry!” she chirped. She set the tankard down, looked around for who-knew-what, and then gathered her skirts in a hand and used them to sponge up the water, making a dark stain on the dove-gray wool. “And, um, Dean today,” she added hesitantly as she patted his skin. “I know I’m...I mean, it’s a dress, but Dean. If that’s okay?”

“Of course, Dean,” he acknowledged. “My apologies.”

Dean gave Castiel a relieved smile and another awkward silence fell.

“So, um, are you hungry?” Dean repeated, filling a spoon with broth and offering it to Castiel.

“What happened, Dean?”

“You should eat,” Dean continued, moving the spoon slowly towards Castiel’s mouth as if he were a recalcitrant child.

“I’ll eat as much as you’d like if you’ll explain where I am, how I came to be here and how you’re doing,” suggested Castiel.

“Oh, is that all,” he muttered sarcastically. “Fine. I accept your conditions, Sir Knight.”

Despite his words, Dean dropped the spoon back into the bowl, grabbed a stool that Castiel hadn’t noticed nearby, and placed it close to the bed. Then, he retrieved a second pillow from the floor and used it to prop Castiel up at a gentle angle that nonetheless put painful pressure on his wound.

“Is that comfortable?” asked Dean, concerned, sparing a glance for the swell that Castiel’s chest made of the blankets and the injury hidden beneath.

“It’s fine,” Castiel lied. “I’m fine.” A skeptical look suggested that Dean saw through the weak subterfuge but Dean didn’t argue. Instead, he took up the bowl and offered Castiel a spoonful of aromatic soup. Castiel obediently opened his mouth. The broth was damn good, flavored with herbs, and the spoon was dominated by a chunk of some white root vegetable rendered so soft in the cooking that they broke apart when Castiel tried to chew it. Dean stared at him thoughtfully and filled the spoon again. Castiel kept his mouth stubbornly shut.

“Castiel…”

“You promised me explanations,” said Castiel. “You—” Dean stuffed the spoon in his mouth and he spluttered around soup and a bite of unknown stringy meat.
“Kubrick stabbed you in the back during the battle for the castle,” said Dean, patiently waiting as Castiel chewed and then giving him another spoonful. “I thought you were going to die. No one was able to see to you until after the battle was done.” Castiel opened his mouth to ask a question but Dean instead gave him more soup and kept talking. “It’s been a week and a half since then and you’ve been unconscious the entire time. If there hadn’t been an Inquisitor specializing in medicine visiting the city, even Dr. Roberts would not have been able to save you. Thanks to the Inquisitor’s efforts and the combined toil of every doctor in the city, only a dozen people died.” Castiel’s knit in concern. “No one you knew. Or at least, no one you liked. Kubrick is dead, and Walker might not make it. Sir Henriksen and Lady Harvelle both took minor wounds but they are mostly recovered already.”

“What happened to Kubrick?” Castiel managed to ask before Dean shoved more soup in his mouth.

“When you fell, he charged Sam. Sam beat him.”

“And killed him?”

“Sam didn’t, no,” Dean said steadily, though he wouldn’t meet Castiel’s eyes. “I killed him.” Passion flared as bright as the candle light in Dean’s gaze as he looked up and aggressively spooned more soup into Castiel. “Because I thought he’d killed you.”

“I’m fine, Dean.” Castiel offered what he hoped was a gentle smile, but Dean only scowled at him.

“You’re not,” said Dean. “He ran you through. There was literally a sword through you. I watched it happen! And there was so much blood, there’s still stains on the grit between the cobblestones where you lay, and when he pulled the blade back out there were chunks of inside you falling out and… and…I’ve never seen anything so awful. Never. And it happened because of me!”

“Absolutely not,” Castiel said firmly before Dean could start babbling again. That the boy was upset was understandable, presupposing that he truly loved Castiel. Castiel still struggled with that part but he couldn’t deny that Dean’s affection seemed constant and genuine. Still… “Nothing that has happened is your fault. The King is to blame. He abused you, he raped you…” A grimace overtook Dean’s face the longer Castiel spoke, and he stopped forcing soup on Castiel. “…and he set me up as the fall guy for his scheme to marry you to the Prince of Vermilion.” Increasingly concerned, Castiel trailed off. “What is it?”

It’s been a week and a half. So much could go wrong in a week and a half…

Dean apologized to his father. Dean married Michael. Dean betrayed his brother. Dean made one of innumerable compromises in order to protect me. Please tell me that’s not it…


“Dean…”

Eyes downcast, Dean focused on feeding Castiel. The bowl was growing low, and Castiel had eaten enough that he was starting to feel sick, but seeing to him appeared to give Dean comfort so Castiel dutifully opened his mouth and accepted another spoonful, and another, and another.

“He loves me,” Dean finally muttered, as if that explained everything. “I’m sure he loves me. He told me he loves me.”

“Do you truly think that what he did was an act of love?” asked Castiel.

“He said it was,” Dean said unconvincingly. “He said…you know what he said. I’ve told you. But
everyone else thinks it was inappropriate. It still doesn’t feel that way.”

“Love is giving, Dean,” Castiel explained what he’d not understood himself until recently. That’s not true...Gabriel loved me...if I’d followed his example... “Love is generous and self-sacrificing. To love someone is to put their needs before your own, to take care of them when they’re sick…” He looked meaningfully at the bowl of soup. “To accept their needs and desires and constraints. To love someone is to want to see them comfortable and happy and satisfied and safe, even at the cost of one’s own comfort and happiness and satisfaction and safety. When you consider your father’s actions, can you truly believe that those were his motivations?”

“There’s a trial,” Dean said, tears in the corners of his eyes. “We won the battle in the Square. The King was arrested. Singer and several other Knights were locked in the dungeon, and now the King is in their cell and the only reason that Queen Naomi and Prince Michael aren’t with him is that no one wishes to cause a diplomatic incident that could lead to war. Everyone took the rallying cry of ‘equal justice’ seriously, so there’s to be a trial, with a jury of nobles and witnesses and sworn statements and evidence. It’d have started already but they’re still trying to find some of those who the King exiled to keep my secret. Far too many seem to have died under ‘mysterious’ circumstances.”

“Is that the behavior of a man who loved you?” Castiel asked again.

“No,” conceded Dean softly. The first tears fell. Shaking his head, Dean scraped the sides of the bowl to gather up one last scoop of broth and a last sad piece of carrot and offered it to Castiel with a melancholy, hopeful smile. Despite the disquiet in his stomach and the growing pain of his wound, Castiel accepted the morsel and Dean’s smile widened.

Worth it.

“Well, um, that’s the news,” said Dean, setting the bowl aside with a loud clatter and turning away. “We won, Kubrick is dead, Walker and my father are imprisoned, and most of the Knights of Lawrence stand with us. Sam is to be King with Singer and Harvelle serving as co-Regents and an active betting pool going Kingdom-wide on how soon they’ll be married since everyone but the two of them can see they’re in love. Queen Naomi is lurking about spreading rumor, lies, and innuendo, and I am entirely torn between staying and helping my brother or fleeing to the wilds as quickly as Impala can carry me, save that I daren’t do the second until you are well enough to journey and no one can tell me how long that might take. I should go. You need to rest.”

Dean’s rapid-fire explanation created as many questions as it answered, but with his belly full and whatever medicine was mixed in the broth working its magic, Castiel hardly parse Dean’s words into meaningful information, much less make follow up inquiries. Instead, he laboriously worked one of his arms free of the blankets and held it out, staring an invitation at Dean. A wounded sound caught in Dean’s throat and he shook his head, scattering tear drops around. His hair had grown longer again, tendrils swaying over his forehead.

“I shouldn’t. You need—”

“You,” Castiel interrupted. “I need you, Dean. Please?”

Biting his lip, Dean ran a hand through his hair, mussing the strands in all directions, and then nodded slowly. He reached down, untucked the blankets on his side of the bed, and climbed in beside Castiel. A soft, content moan drifted through the room. Castiel couldn’t have said which of them made the noise and he didn’t care. Dean was at his side, a warm, solid presence gently placing an arm around Castiel’s belly and a skirt-trapped knee over Castiel’s thigh, breathing hot onto Castiel’s neck.
“I’ll take care of you,” Dean whispered. “I accept your needs and constraints. All I want is to see you safe and happy. I love you, Castiel. So much. I’ve been so scared. But you’re going to be alright – you are – and it’s so hard to care about anything else, now that I’m assured of that.”

“I’m sorry I frightened you,” murmured Castiel drowsily. “I’d give anything to ease your burdens and quell the confusion in your heart.” With difficulty, he pressed a kiss to Dean’s forehead. Dean started and then relaxed with a contented sigh.

“I know you would,” said Dean. “You’re not to blame. My father is. Everything that’s happened can be laid at his feet and that, more than anything, proves what you’ve said. He didn’t love me. He doesn’t love me. If I say it enough times, perhaps I’ll come to believe it.”

“Love you.”

Castiel thought Dean’s words deserved a better reply but he couldn’t muster anything. His mind was fuzzy, his awareness scattered, and it was all he could do to keep his eyes open. Shifting away from him, leaving an awful void that nearly caused Castiel to choke with grief, Dean sat up, took the second pillow from beneath Castiel’s head, and blew out the candle, making soothing noises that hit Castiel’s awareness the way he’d always imagined a parent’s affection would have: infinitely calming, perfectly peaceful, and absolutely comforting. The room plunged into darkness and Dean lay back once more, shimmied close to Castiel, and eased down with a sigh. There were words in Castiel’s mind, if only he could grasp them – things that he needed to say, or that Dean needed to hear, or something. Awareness was increasingly elusive and he couldn’t make himself speak, couldn’t find a way to communicate.

“I’ve got you, Cas.” Dean kissed the words into Castiel’s cheek and jawline. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re safe now. You’ll always be safe with me, my love.”

Castiel let his anxiety go. Whatever he wanted to say, Dean knew. Dean knew him, inside and out, and accepted him exactly how he was.

I adore you.

“Love you…”

With Dean’s reassurance ringing serenity through his thoughts, Castiel fell asleep.

“I will speak with my son,” snapped a strident voice. “You will stand aside!”

“No.” Dean’s voice was unequivocal, undeniable, powerful. “He is still recovering, and right now he’s asleep. I don’t care what international incidents it might cause; if you wake him I will see you pay.”

Pain thrummed through Castiel’s head as he forced his eyes open. He’d been in and out of consciousness – he couldn’t say for sure when he slept as opposed to when he passed out – for several days. Sometimes he woke up alone, sometimes he awoke with Dean beside him, sometimes he woke with Dean sitting nearby reading a book or doing embroidery. Sometimes Dean wore a dress, sometimes he wore breeches and a jacket. At first the room was always dark save for candlelight, but after an unknown time he woke to find sunlight streaming through several windows and learned that the only reason the room had been perpetually dark and dungeon-like was that thick blankets had been placed over the windows to keep it warm and safe and quiet. While Castiel had been recovering, spring had come to Lawrence, and pleasant breezes wafted in the smell of flowers, damp earth, and a hint of decay from the swamps to the south.
“Child, you are ceaselessly sweet, naïve, and unqualified,” sniffed the woman. “You have no right to deny me entry, nor do you have the means. Stand aside or I will see you chastised, as someone should have chastised you years ago.” She sounded powerful with age, arrogant, and absolutely certain that she was correct. The speaker must be Queen Naomi, and when she said son she meant Castiel.

“No.”

He’d given scant thought to his nobility since Dean had come to him and Castiel had learned that his love was alright, and Dean had not mentioned it. It had been surprisingly easy to forget that the Queen of Vermilion had made the preposterous claim before thousands of listeners that Castiel was a Prince, and offered unimpeachable, impossible proof by revealing his birthright imprint.

“You—”

“Insult me all you want,” Dean continued. “I’ll not let you near Castiel until he’s well enough to talk to you.”

“Dean,” Castiel called.

“Damn,” Dean snapped. “Castiel, all is well. Go back to sleep.”

“I’d like to hear what she has to say.”

With much grumbling, Dean led the Queen into the room, their footsteps audible on the carpeted wooden floor until they finally came into Castiel’s limited view. Dean wore pants today, his tiara encircling his head. The Queen was dressed as for a court function, her full skirts of finest silk that shimmered in the sunlight, a crown on her head surrounded by artfully arranged ringlets.

“You’re not my mother,” said Castiel as soon as she met Castiel’s eyes, a moue of distaste twisting her lips. “You may have given birth to me but you abandoned Gabriel and I. You forfeited any right to us when you sold us.”

“Stop posturing,” she replied dismissively, sitting with obvious disgust on the stool Dean had been using to care for him. “And make your…” Trailing off, she turned her aloof expression towards Dean. “Girlfriend? Boyfriend? What are you, Princess?”

“I—” Dean began angrily.

“It doesn’t matter,” interrupted Naomi. “Make it leave.”

Dean had told Castiel that he’d been going by Dean and male pronouns and the title of Prince since he’d returned to the city, though he’d varied his wardrobe to his mood. Too many people looked at him and saw the status quo, the person Dean had been for the first 18 years of his life. While he wasn’t sure who or what he was now, he was absolutely certain that he was no longer that person, and so he went by Dean and forced everyone who spoke to him or about him to acknowledge that he had changed – that he had been changed.

“Absolutely not,” Castiel snapped. “And if you are attempting to win my goodwill you are doing a dismal job of it. You will treat Dean with the respect that he deserves as a fellow person and a Prince of Lawrence, or you will leave.”

“I couldn’t care less about your goodwill,” said Naomi, “or about how this toy perceives me.”

“Then I can think of no reason why Dean should leave,” Castiel said, holding out his arm to Dean,
who strode defiantly to Castiel’s side and sat down on the edge of the bed, staring rage at Naomi.

“Because I have commanded it!”

“Your orders have no weight here,” said Dean, the embodiment of grace under pressure. “I am Prince of Lawrence and my brother is to be King. Speak or leave. It is only out of token politeness that you are suffered to remain in the Kingdom after you participated in my father’s efforts to foment insurrection to defend his crimes.”

“What crimes?” Naomi sneered. “The children of royalty are the tools of their parents and Kingdoms, pawns to be used to further their ends, just as Kings and Queens are merely an extension of the will of the people whom they rule. You have no independent existence, no personhood of your own, and thus no crime can possibly be committed against you.”

“I’m sure you think so,” Dean replied steadily, taking Castiel’s hand, “given how you treated two of your sons.”

“Do you think I wanted you for a daughter-in-law? Do you think that my son had the least interest in you? You’re ornamental, Princess.”

“And yet if I took up the dagger that I’ve hidden beneath this bed and drove it through your heart as I did Sir Kubrick’s, you’d still be dead,” Dean announced as casually as if declaring that he’d like to defeat her at a game of wickets. Seeing Naomi’s incredulous stare, Dean added, “Don’t think that I won’t do it. Your life is valueless to me.”

“I’m a Queen, you silly thing,” said Naomi. “If you kill me you’ll bring disorder and chaos to Kingdoms around the world and plunge your beloved Lawrence into war. Thousands will die over your petty whims.”

“Perhaps,” Dean replied, a beautiful, serene smile on her lips. “Or perhaps Prince Michael is as tired of being your tool as I have become of being my father’s. Perhaps, after near 50 years under your loving care and attention, he is ready to be King without his mother looking over his shoulder. Perhaps he’d like to finally have the chance to find love and wed on his own terms. Perhaps he realized that King John’s alliance was with you, not Michael, and that he’s as much a pawn and as disposable in your eyes as I am in the eyes of my father.”

“Nonsense.” Naomi broke into a smile as if she’d scored a point, but Dean remained unflappable. “How dare you claim to know my son’s mind better than I do? He thinks no such thing.”

“He and I talk a great deal when you’re not around. You’d be surprised what he’ll admit when he doesn’t have a harridan controlling his every move and thought.”

“Foolish, stupid child.” The Queen didn’t sound as sure as she had before, though.

“This is all beside the point.” Castiel was enjoying their sparring match. Watching Dean school the matron who would have been his mother-in-law was pleasant; he did so with such strength and confidence. The only thing better would be watching Dean kill her.

Castiel decided not to think too hard on the origins of that macabre thought.

“You came to speak with me, Naomi;” he said. “Speak, or leave.”

“Very well,” said Naomi with the resignation of one who thought they were humoring a toddler. “You are my son, Castiel, as was Gabriel. You could be again.”
“Absolutely not.”

“If you will not return to Vermilion, you will remain a loose thread that I need to pluck,” threatened Naomi.

“You mean that you will need to murder me.” Castiel cut through her silly obfuscation. “If I won’t come back and play Prince in your happy family.”

“We prefer the term assassination when we apply it to politically motivated killings for hire,” Naomi replied with false delicacy.

“You’re welcome to try,” Castiel said, disinterested. “Worse than you have failed.”

“You think so? You still believe that Crowley and Roman were trying to kill you? You’re as silly as this stupid chit. Why do you think you were in Bootbock, Castiel? Who sent you there?” In her questions was the return of her poise and equilibrium. They were in the political sphere once more, and she was confident she had the upper hand.

“Crowley had me stabbed in the back,” said Castiel. “That seems a dead giveaway that he wanted me dead.”

“I had you stabbed in the back,” Naomi corrected. “I want you dead. Your utility to my Kingdom ended the moment you left Crowley’s service. Thank you for that. Without you, he had no further hold on Vermilion. That’s why he’s tried so hard to get you back.”

“Either explain yourself or leave.” Castiel did his best to assume a veneer of disinterest, and in doing so realized he genuinely didn’t care. He was alive. He had Dean. He’d escaped assassins before. If Dean spoke truth about Prince Michael – and Castiel couldn’t imagine why Dean would lie – the Prince did not share the Queen’s opinion on the need to hunt Castiel down. Naomi was old. She wouldn’t live forever. When she was gone, Castiel and Dean would be free. Neither of them would be a tool again. “My interest in your word games is nil.”

“If I leave, you’ll never know why you were sent to Bootbock,” Naomi said as if playing her ace in the hole.

“I know enough.” Castiel shrugged and regretted it as pain twisted his chest and twisted his expression into a grimace.

“It’s time for you to leave,” said Dean, giving Castiel’s hand a reassuring squeeze and rising. He glared at Naomi, then glanced suggestively at the door.

“You’re not serious,” said Naomi incredulously.

“You could still stab you, if you’d prefer,” Dean suggested, sounding adorably hopeful.

“The consequences—”

“Are completely irrelevant to us,” said Castiel. “You’re right about me, Naomi. I’m a pawn. I’ve been a pawn my entire life. But I wasn’t your pawn. I was Crowley’s pawn. He liked games, and I learned the hard way that the only way to win was to not play. I’m not part of your politics. I don’t care about Vermilion. Prince I may be but I haven’t the least interest in your Kingdom and I’d sooner die than seek to rule it. Hunt me down if you feel it’s necessary but you’ll only be wasting effort, time, and resources. All I want is to take my love and leave this bullshit behind, find a place where people say what they mean and do what they say.”
“I mean that I will see you dead, and I will do it, errant Prince of Vermilion,” Naomi spat.

“You do that,” Dean said with a pleasant smile. He circled the bed and seized Naomi’s arm.

“Unhand me!”

“You’re invited to leave – this bedroom, this castle, this Kingdom, as far as I’m concerned,” Dean said, hauling her to her feet. Disgruntled, Naomi righted herself, smoothed her skirts, and stared perturbed hatred at them both. “If you won’t show yourself out, I will drag you out.”

“There will be consequences for what has been said this day,” vowed the Queen.

“You’re welcome to try.” Dean was ceaselessly polite and continued to smile until the Queen stalked from the room. Following her, Dean crossed to the door and closed it, turning the key in the lock. Wheeling on a heel, dazzling Castiel with a brilliant grin, Dean said, “That was fun. Can we tell more rulers to go to hell?”

“As many as you’d like, love,” Castiel replied with a smile. A tension he’d not realized he was carrying eased in his chest. “I feel I shouldn’t tell you, yet I also feel compelled to do so, that I’ve never wanted to bend you over and pound you insensible more than I did when you threatened to kill her.”

“Really?” Dean’s grin didn’t fade but his cheeks flushed crimson. “That turned you on?”

“Very much so,” Castiel agreed, nodding.

“When you told her you didn’t care I felt similarly,” admitted Dean. “Would you believe it never crossed my mind before that I’m allowed to simply not give a damn? I was always taught to be solicitous of those around me, sensitive to their needs. When people are unhappy I genuinely feel I should apologize, like I owe them something even when I’m not at fault. If you feel any such impulse I’ve not seen a sign of it. Indeed, you don’t always apologize even when you ought.”

“Do you expect me to apologize for that?” asked Castiel dryly.

“Not at the moment,” Dean said with a smile, sliding into bed beside him. “The Queen traded you and Gabriel to Crowley as collateral on a loan.” Surprised, Castiel rolled his head to one side so he could meet Dean’s gaze. Downy scruff covered Dean’s chin and his eyes were deep brown-green as the shadows stretched towards mid-afternoon. “Prince Michael told me. He remembers, after a fashion – he was only a child when it happened. Crowley loaned the Kingdom money, and—”

“Dean…”

“—in exchange Naomi sent her children to him, with the expectation that they’d be returned when the loan was repaid. Michael secretly suspects that she always intended to default on the loan, which was why—”

“Dean—”

“—I mean, I think that’s probably why Crowley did what he did to your brother, because he doubted the Queen’s intentions, and—”

“Dean!”

“—you ran…and…” Biting his lip, Dean trailed off. “What?”
“I don’t want to know,” said Castiel.

“You really meant…?”

“Yes, of course I really meant what I told my mother,” Castiel replied acidly. “It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. I’m not Prince of Vermilion no matter what some silly halo about my head suggests about my birth. I’m Castiel, once apprentice to Fergus Crowley, once lover of Dick Roman, once Knight of Lawrence, and now yours. What other label could I possibly want?”

“You mean that?” Dean breathed. “You mean that…” He leaned forward and kissed Castiel with obviously restrained enthusiasm. Heat trailed pleasure through Castiel’s veins, blood thrummed pain through his healing wound. “Wow.” Dean kissed him again. “Sorry, I’m…but…you mean that…!” And again. “You mean that!” And again. “I shouldn’t be so surprised by this, should I?” And again. “But—!” And again. “Sorry, I shouldn’t…” He drew back, pet down Castiel’s front apologetically, smoothed the blankets, and inadvertently caused Castiel more pain than any of the kisses had done.

“Just keep kissing me, Dean,” he grumbled.

Dean broke into a stunning smile and happily obliged.

Chapter End Notes

LAST CHAPTER posts March 26th, 2017!!
“You’re so tall!” Sam exclaimed, his voice lower than it had been the last time Castiel had heard him.

“Funny, I was about to say that to you,” Dean laughed.

Both Princes had grown. Dean was taller than Castiel by inches, and Sam looked to have sprouted by at least a foot, though Castiel thought he must be imagining that the difference was so great. It had only been a few months since they’d left Lawrence. Dean and Castiel had scarce explored the mysteries of the Gilded Woods, much less ventured farther afield, when word came that the King’s trial was ending and the verdict was imminent. If John Winchester was found innocent, he’d reassume the throne. If he were found guilty, castration was the least of his worries. The crimes he intended against Dean’s person subjected him to the same punishment that would have awaited Alastair were he tried in Lawrence for illegal fleshcrafting: execution.

The siblings excitedly conversed and Castiel held back, held silent and let them catch up. Sweeping gestures and animated facial expressions accompanied enthusiastic competition over which could share the most interesting story, a hubbub that continued as they made their way through the gates at the Royal Square, still under repair after being broken open during the battle. Guards quietly, dutifully surrounded them, and Mills and Singer stood behind Sam, shadowing him as Castiel shadowed Dean.

“Good to see you again,” said Singer gruffly, catching Castiel’s eye. Castiel gave him a smirk, and Singer shrugged. It was the nicest thing that Singer had ever said to him and they both knew it wasn’t true. They had never gotten along; Singer couldn’t comprehend why the King had brought Castiel into his employ. In retrospect, though, everyone understood. The only question was how John had learned Castiel’s true identity, but Castiel didn’t care enough to ask and no one had bothered to ask on his behalf.

“You as well,” lied Castiel. Singer gave him a knowing grin and shook his head.

“How’s the wound healing?” asked Mills.

“Hurts when it rains,” Castiel replied with a shrug that was mostly pain-free. He was recovered from his injury, after a fashion, and what twinges remained he ignored, and lied to Dean about. Castiel suspected that if they took several months with no riding and no training and no sex, Castiel would heal the rest of the way. However, he wasn’t prepared to give up any of the three. The world was enormous and they only had a lifetime to explore. Finally given the opportunity to exert himself physically at something less lady-like then sitting side-saddle, Dean excelled at swordplay and wrestling and sleight of hand and everything else Castiel showed him. And though their sex was less frequent and less desperate than it had been those first few dizzying weeks, it was still often and vigorous and Castiel would never suggest they cut back.
“How’s the trial going?” he asked as the boisterous conversation before them highlighted how awkwardly the three Knights trailed behind.

“It’s had its ups and downs,” said Mills with distaste. “These things always do. Every big shocking reveal has excited curiosity, every reverse has had people swearing to never doubt the King again. You know the drill.”

“Ah yes, the court of public opinion,” Castiel agreed. “It could easily turn into a lynch mob in Bootbock.”

“We’re a bit better at the ‘law and order’ end of things here in Lawrence,” Singer said. “Since the initial battle things have mostly calmed down. ‘Course, everyone is sure that the trial will sort things right – regardless of whether they think John is guilty or no. Whatever happens today, a goodly number of folks’ll be upset. I’ve got all hands on deck just in case.”

“You’re over-reacting,” said Mills. “More people than not think he’s guilty. If he’s found innocent, they’ll be relieved, and if he’s found guilty, they’ll feel vindicated. And those who think he’s innocent…well, everyone likes to see the mighty brought down to mortal size. I don’t think we’ll see the fall of Lawrence tonight no matter the verdict.”

“You keep hopin’ for the best,” Singer said. “And I’ll keep preparin’ for the worst.”

“It’s time!” An unfamiliar soldier called from down the corridor, loud enough to be heard over Sam and Dean’s conversation. The siblings stopped talking, mirth cut off mid-laugh. “Hurry!” Walking double-time down the castle corridors, they approached the throne room. A line of guards blocked the entryway, and when the Prince, Dean and the Knights approached they stepped aside and opened the doors.

A hubbub of noise within cut off abruptly and the assembled crowd turned to see who had arrived. A strange pain, unrelated to his past injuries, clenched at Castiel’s heart. He’d not seen the throne room since King John had given Castiel his orders so many months ago. Looking within now at the neatly arranged benches, row upon row filled with people, and the judge, jury and barristers seated at the front of the room where the thrones would normally rest, Castiel felt like he was a new man, looking at a new room with new eyes. He hardly recognized the man he’d been then, the thoughts that had been paramount in his mind when King John had unexpectedly summoned him.

After a moment’s indecision, their party stepped within. Heads bowed respectfully toward them. Henriksen and Harvelle were already present, and Henriksen rose and gestured for them to come to the front of the room where a bench had been reserved. King John sat with his barrister, James Murphy, and stared through his children as if he couldn’t see them. He looked exactly as he had the last time Castiel had seen him: dressed in robes of state, expression fixed with absolute surety that he was in the right.

“Thank you for attending today,” said the Judge, a dignified woman named Moseley. “For the past two months we’ve heard evidence on this case, and now the jury is ready to tell us their assessment. My Lady Barnes, what have you decided?”

“The six of us have talked it over and we agree one hundred percent: the King is guilty as sin,” said Lady Barnes glibly, staring hate and disgust at her former liege. A titter of agreement went through the onlookers. They’d also heard the evidence. John didn’t react. “What he did to...” She paused, looked at Dean, took in his tiara, his smooth cheeks, his rouged lips, his shaggy, shoulder-length hair, and his jacket, and continued. “…Prince Dean is unethical, illegal, and morally reprehensible.”

“I am so very pleased to hear you say so,” said Judge Moseley with a benign smile. She turned
towards the King. “I regret to inform your Majesty that this is the last time you’ll be referred to by that title. In accordance with the verdict reached by our noble jury, you are hereby stripped of your title.” Castiel watched the King. He expected an outburst, anger, a hint of the same strong, controlling man that Dean had described to him, the same schemer who had been on display at the Royal Square battle. King John continued to stare ahead impassively, though, catching his eldest’s eye and scowling as if he hadn’t heard what the Judge said. “Winchester? Do you understand?”

“Thank you for your efforts,” the King said, snapping back into the moment. He rose, straightened his robes, and smiled. “I’m pleased by this outcome, and look forward to reassuming my rightful place as leader of this grand nation.”

“You were found guilty, Winchester,” said the Judge, rolling her eyes.

“Nonsense,” he said. “This preposterous fabrication cannot stand. These are my children, just as this is my Kingdom and my castle and my robes and my throne and my crown – possessions, every one. A man cannot be punished for misusing his house or tearing a hole in his robe, and a King certainly cannot be punished for bringing his children up fit to rule future Kingdoms.”

“The evidence was damning,” said Lady Barnes tightly. “Multiple witnesses described how you changed your eldest and then arranged for his body to be illegally modified.”

“Sir Castiel did that.” For the first time an expression came on to King Winchester’s face as he turned to Castiel and glared murderously.

Castiel smiled.

“Why isn’t he on trial?” the King snarled, pointing to Castiel. “Why is he allowed to walk free? Why is he allowed to be within the same city as my daughter, much less touch her, defile her, use her, after what he’s done?”

“Had you been acquitted—”

“Seize him!” The King’s voice rang, a call to duty like a claxon across the throne room turned courthouse. No one moved except for Barrister Murphy, who rose and put a restraining hand on John’s shoulder, but John shrugged it off. “I am still your King and I demand that criminal be put in chains and tried for his multitude of sins. Let him be forced to defend himself against justified accusations, as I have been forced to defend myself against unjustified ones! Let him be revealed and exposed for every wrong he has committed!”

“What crime do you accuse Sir Castiel of committing in Lawrence?” asked the Judge patiently. Her show of calm highlighted how absurd John’s bluster was.

“What crime? What crime? Even putting aside the torture, murder, and larceny that he is guilty of many times over in Bootbock, he kidnapped and subverted and raped my daughter!” shouted King John.

“He did no such thing,” said Dean in a ringing voice, rising. “Castiel is not on trial because an inquest found that he’d done no wrongs that could be tried in Lawrence. Whatever crimes he committed Bootbock are for the authorities there to prosecute should they choose to do so.”

“Deanna – my Deanna,” the King crooned, switching moods so abruptly and disturbingly that shocked murmurs and angry muttering spread through the crowd. “For you to be so deceived… I’ve failed you. I see that now. I should have better prepared you for the wicked men who would seek to take advantage of you. Is this because I sent you away? I’d have brought you back! The plans were
all made. Once a Vermilion heir was born, I’d have seen to it that your attachment to Vermilion was terminated and that you were returned back home to Papa where you belong!”

“We shouldn’t have come,” said Dean softly, taking Castiel’s arm.

“You wanted to see this through,” Castiel whispered. Dean nodded and leaned into Castiel, setting his head on Castiel’s shoulder, and Castiel enfolded his Goddess in his arms.

“You get your filthy hands off my daughter,” roared John.

Castiel turned toward the front of the room to see that John had stepped down from the throne dais and crossed the scant paces between them. Someone screamed, voices raised in furious shouts, the Judge called ineffectually for order, and a hand was at Castiel’s throat, powerfully hauling him to his feet. Agony stabbed through him – his sword wound from the battle in the Square was tugged and twisted in new and awful ways as Winchester got in Castiel’s face, spluttering in fury. The King screamed, spittle hitting Castiel’s face, but the pain left Castiel too weak to fight back, too distracted to understand what vituperation John spewed. Fingers closed tight over his jugular, the King squeezing, squeezing…

…and then the pressure disappeared, and the strength holding Castiel up disappeared, and he dropped limply onto the bench, gasping through the pain as tears filled his eyes and glorious air filled his lungs. Only the quick action of those sitting behind him kept him from toppling backward.

“Cas? Cas, are you okay?”

Castiel’s vision swam back into focus to the beautiful sight of Dean before him, infinitely more welcome than red-faced, apoplectic John Winchester had been. Dean’s hair was disheveled, his crown askew, and he had many more freckles than Castiel remembered.

I should count them, he’s so beautiful…I could stare at his face forever.

“Fine,” Castiel croaked.

Don’t worry, my Goddess, I’m alright…

Concerned, he reached up and cupped Dean’s cheek. Several of his freckles smeared bright red.

Not freckles.

Blood.

“What?” he asked blankly.

“I stopped him,” Dean smiled, though there were tears in his eyes. He reached out and mirrored Castiel’s gesture, taking Castiel’s face in his hands but not before Castiel saw the rivulets of red on his hands. “He was going to hurt you…he was hurting you…so I stopped him.”

“Dean…”

Awareness of the chaos around them returned unpleasantly. People shouted all around them, Judge Moseley ineffectually slamming her gavel on the bench before her.

“Arrest the Princess!”

“The King! Save the King!”
“Good riddance to bad rubbish!”

“Order! Order in the court!”

“What happened?”

“Perhaps it’s time you two leave.” Sam appeared at Dean’s side and placed a firm hand on each of their shoulders. Nodding agreement, Dean helped Castiel to his feet as the Knights kept the crowd at bay. King John knelt on the floor, hands over his stomach, his robes obscuring his wound. Blood leaked crimson between his fingers, splattered onto the stone floor, dripped from his mouth, and he stared at them, stunned. His lips worked but no sound came out.

Castiel resisted the urge to kick him.

Not sparing a glance for his dying father, Sam escorted them to the door behind the dais that led to the King’s private antechamber.

“Wait here,” Sam said, shoving them into the room. “I’ll sort things out.” The door slammed behind him, bringing sudden, shocking silence. The office was small and lushly appointed: rich carpets on the floor, fine tapestries on the walls, desk and chair carved of mahogany and polished ‘till it shone. Castiel was reminded unpleasantly of Alastair’s office.

“So,” Castiel said.

“So,” Dean echoed.

Neither spoke for several minutes. Not a sound from the throne room penetrated into the private chamber. Castiel’s gaze wandered over books whose spines had never been cracked and age-darkened oil paintings, and he dropped into a chair set aside for visitors.

A choking sound jerked Castiel’s attention back to Dean. Expecting to see Dean crying, Castiel was halfway to his feet, hand already outstretched, when he realized Dean was laughing. The first few bursts of noise were broken and distraught, but as each escaped, Dean seemed to surrender, and the next was stronger, and then stronger still, as he gave in. Collapsing on the desk, sweeping state papers aside to flutter to the floor, Dean heaved with laughter until tears streamed down his face. Castiel could only watch, speechless.

“I’m not sad,” Dean managed finally, voice thick with wonder. Renewed fits of the giggles overtook him. “I think I should be, but I’m not!”

“Dean…”

“I killed him,” Dean laughed, then put his hands over his mouth as if he realized what he’d said. He whispered, “I killed him. I killed him. After everything he did…”

“Does it feel good?” Castiel asked uncertainly. He’d never seen Dean like this. Dean had killed before, though only twice since Kubrick, when a group of bandits set upon them while they were traveling. This was different. Dean had killed his father.

“It does,” he admitted as if he scarce dared to own the emotion. He broke into a stunning grin. “I can tell no one that, save you, but right now, right here, when it’s just the two of us? It did feel good, Castiel. He hurt me, and he hurt you, and if he’d won this trial he’d have done so again, and he deserved to die as surely as Crowley deserved to be impaled by the unicorn of the Wood. We both had profoundly disappointing fathers and now…now we’re both free. Gods and Spirits above, where do you want to go next, Castiel? Should we go to Sioux Falls? Should we explore the unknown
islands to the south? Perhaps we could seek the legendary Heaven? We can go anywhere, Castiel! No one will stop us!"

Faced with Dean’s effervescent happiness, Castiel searched for a reply, but none seemed necessary.

“But first – we’ve got a bed tonight, a wonderful, plush bed in the privacy and sanctuary of the palace. Who knows when we might next have one? We should put it to good use, the best use…” Dean trailed off. Castiel wasn’t sure why. He’d made no secret of how arousing he found it when Dean was violent. It was a little sick of him, a little broken of him, a holdover from when violence and sex were inextricably linked in Castiel’s relationship with Dick Roman. Dean knew that, so why did he hesitate?

“I want to try that thing you asked for…that we discussed…I said I needed time? I think I’m ready. Right now, I think I’m ready.”

Castiel smiled. “It’s your call.”

“Now, Castiel,” repeated Dean.

“Like right now?”

“Did I stutter?”

“Here?”

“There’s a secret passage out the back,” said Dean, pointing at an enormous tapestry that, now that Castiel was paying attention, he saw swayed to an apparently sourceless breeze. “No need to stay here. No one out there wants to hear what we have to say anyway, and as much as it would…please me…to demonstrate my…” Dean trailed off and smirked. “…my Knight’s enjoyment and obedience to all the fine people of the courtroom, I’d prefer privacy.”

“Lead the way, your Highness.” Castiel gestured graciously, and with a lascivious grin, Dean brushed the tapestry aside to reveal a doorway painted to match the stonework.

There was still blood on Dean’s hands. Some smeared on the wall as he pushed a stone and the door opened.

Castiel should not find that hot.

But he did.

So maybe he should. Maybe his feelings were appropriate. As far as Dean was concerned, Castiel was through questioning his reactions. They were what they were, and he wouldn’t change them for the world.

Trembling with anticipation, Castiel followed as Dean led him up a flight of stairs.

Right now…

*****

Blankets bunched in Castiel’s fists as, groaning, he pressed his face into the mattress. Dean’s fingers slid out of him. It had been so long since Castiel had done this. A finger on his prostate was one thing; Dean took a wicked delight in stimulating Castiel’s hole. But this…this was different.

“I…I can do this,” Dean whispered, sounding like he was trying to work up the nerve. A hand slid
down Castiel’s back and curled around his ass cheek. A fingernail scraped over Castiel’s taut rim.

“Don’t have to…” Castiel managed. Suggesting that Dean stop was torture. Castiel liked getting fucked, but if Dean wasn’t interested Castiel would never force him.

“I want to,” said Dean, troubled. “You’ve mentioned this more than once. If it means that much to you, then it means that much to me. But it’s not just that. I’ve got a dick,” Dean’s cock brushed over Castiel’s ass, and Castiel mouthed at the bed linens and shoved himself back towards Dean, “and I want to know how this feels. I want to know how everything feels. If I don’t like it, we don’t have to do it again, but I’ll never know if I don’t try.” Blunt pressure hit Castiel’s hole and he whimpered.

“Please…”

“You truly want me this badly?” Dean asked with wonder. Castiel nodded frantically, grinding his nose into the mattress.

“Anyway you’ll have me, Prince,” Castiel agreed. “How can that still surprise you?”

“I don’t…I mean…I guess on some level I still believed that in your eyes I was a surrogate for a woman,” Dean admitted, shame-tinged voice incongruous with the continued press of his cock against Castiel’s pucker. He seemed unaware of how crazy he was making Castiel with the drag of his dick over Castiel’s slickened crack. “And women don’t…women can’t…”

“I’ve always liked both, Dean,” growled Castiel. “And you’re both, and you’re perfect. Yes, I prefer men, but you’ve got the body of a man, and for the rest…you’re you, and you’re all I want. You’re all I ever want. Please…” Castiel had to focus on each of his fingers individually to make them release the bedspread so that he could reach behind himself and offer a hand to Dean. Leaning forward, Dean wrapped Castiel’s hand in his own, rubbed his palm with a thumb, then interlaced their fingers. Dean’s movement brought him closer over Castiel’s back, pressed his cock more firmly into Castiel’s perineum. The heat of Dean’s body hovering so close over him sent sympathetic shivers through Castiel’s body.

“Please!”

“I’ve got you,” Dean murmured, squeezing Castiel’s hand. His hesitancy seemed gone, his reluctance flown. They’d have to talk about the issues Dean had raised, but that was for later. Now was for…

Sensation – not pleasure, not yet, but pressure and fullness and a twinge of pain and shiver of heat – burst through Castiel, demolished his thoughts, as Dean used his free hand to line himself up and slowly, slowly push forward into Castiel’s body. The movement was so drawn out, so impossibly new after so long without, that Castiel groaned long and low.

“Oh…” Dean whispered, “Ooooh…” A quiet wet sound marked his hips coming to rest flush on Castiel’s ass cheeks. Panting, tears beaded at the corners of his eyes, Castiel clenched and unclenched his ass. It took all his willpower not to rock back against Dean, not to push for more immediately. Dean made a pained sound that helped shore up Castiel’s restraint and breathed through his burning, urgent need for more.

He needs time. He still might not want this. He still might not be okay…

Castiel’s hole twitched around the cock filling him. Dean was small, would always be small, but the longer he stretched Castiel without moving, the better he felt and the more desperate Castiel grew. The mattress bobbled beneath them as Dean shifted his knees, rolled his hips slightly, and bent down
further over Castiel until his chest was flush with Castiel’s back. Lips kissed behind Castiel’s ear. So close, Castiel could hear Dean’s faint pants. Lifting their joined hands, Dean curled an arm around Castiel’s waist and pressed the back of his hand to Castiel’s belly, just low enough that Castiel’s straining hard cock brushed against Dean’s fingers. His other arm supported enough of his weight that he didn’t crush Castiel.

“This feels…” Dean trailed off, shimmied his hips, drew them back and sank back in. “This is good, Cas.” He pulled back again, pushed back in again. “This is really good.”

That’s good, Dean, I’m glad, was what Castiel wanted to say, but all he managed was a broken “Please…” Dean chuckled, a criminally deep, masculine sound, and obliged him. There were no big gestures, no aggressive thrusts. Instead, Dean clung to Castiel’s back, sucked kisses into the curve of his neck, and fucked him slowly and steadily with a determined, steady rhythm. The slap of skin on skin and quiet, breathy noises filled the air. Every time Dean filled him completely, Castiel’s breath hitched, and his hips rolled up into every thrust. The pleasure built as slowly and steadily as Dean’s tempo. Words – pleas, he thought – leaked from him but he was too senseless to know what he said. He was completely surrounded, encompassed, filled, by the most wonderful man, the most wonderful woman, the most wonderful person, he’d ever met.

“Like you like this,” Dean huffed, picking his pace up. “Desperate…needy…starting to understand why you like fucking me so much…” Castiel groaned to hear the filthy language in his Goddess’ voice. After so long without doing this, he was shocked by how quickly heat suffused him.

No. I didn’t forget. It was never like this before. This isn’t just about sex, this is about trust. I would never let anyone but Dean treat me this tenderly, and he would never do this for anyone else.

“Dean, please…”

“Yes…my Knight…?” Dean pressed his face against the curve of Castiel’s neck. Sweat dampened their skin, slickened between them as Dean’s chest dragged over Castiel’s back with every thrust. “What…do you…want?” His hips never stopped working, and his hand clenched Castiel’s more and more tightly. “How…can I…best…pleasure you?” Castiel’s cock bucked and jumped with every thrust, the brush of the sensitive head against his belly and Dean’s hand the only stimulation he received other than the constant friction of Dean fucking into his body. “Tell me!”

“Please touch me,” whimpered Castiel.

Never been like this…never been this good…please, Dean, please…

“I am touching you,” Dean taunted, clinging closer to Castiel’s back, pressing their paired hands firm into Castiel’s belly, rolling his hips to drag himself through Castiel’s channel.

“My cock,” Castiel whined. “Touch my cock…touch my cock…!”

“No.”

“Please—!”

“Show me…how much…you want this.” As if Castiel’s pleas drove Dean wild, he shifted his rhythm, humped Castiel’s ass harder, more firmly, thrusting so sharply that Castiel’s knees slid forward with each meeting of hips and ass. “Come…come on my cock, Cas…”

“Dean—”

“Do it,” Dean chanted sing-song words in time to his thrusts. “Feels good, right? I killed a man –
killed my father – for you today. I’ll kill anyone who tries to hurt you.” Pleasure mounted blindingly in Castiel’s mind. The world washed the same deep purple as the blanket that Castiel’s face was pressed into, and he gasped in time to Dean’s thrusts and his mesmerizing voice. “You’re mine, Castiel. Mine. This is my body. This is my ass. These are my hands. Show me my gorgeous blue eyes. Show me how much my boy loves getting fucked. Show me what a good boy you are, Cas.”

“Oh Gods,” Castiel moaned. He forced his eyes open – or so he thought, he saw nothing – and tried to ride out the wave upon wave of bliss that tumbled him over with every thrust of Dean’s hips, every insistent demand that Dean whispered in his ear.

“I’ve got you, Cas.”

“I know you do, Dean, I know…”

“You can feel it, right?”

“Yes.” Castiel nodded frantically. He wasn’t sure what it was but he felt good, he felt so incredibly good – loved and protected and cared for and cared about and wanted and good. He felt entitled. He felt deserving.

“’m so close,” Dean mumbled. “Love the sounds you’re making. Never seen this side of you ‘fore, Cas.”

“De—”

“Just let it go,” whispered Dean. Skin slapped filthily as Dean thrust into him so hard that his hips hitched up. Castiel cried out. “Just let it happen…”

On the next thrust Castiel shattered. He’d never come without a touch to his dick before, never come simply by being fucked, and it was like no other orgasm he’d felt, intense and all-encompassing. For an instant – or maybe for a lifetime of instants – the world ceased to exist. There was only heat incinerating him and pleasure pulsing incandescent through his veins and something deep within him taking root, nestling down deep, claiming him and marking him as owned, forever owned, in the best possible way. The feeling didn’t fade when reality crashed back in around him. He came back to awareness to find himself sobbing into the blankets, hips desperately, involuntarily rolling up against Dean’s dead weight atop him.

“Cas…” Dean croaked. Castiel tried to answer, tried to find any words to express the rapture he’d just experienced, but all that escaped when he opened his mouth was sobbing gasps for air and broken pleas. “Gotta…gotta stop…please…”

Stopping his body from jerkily pursuing every iota of feeling he could pull from Dean’s cock was one of the most difficult things that Castiel had ever done. But Dean needed him to, so he did. Stilling his hips, iron will made flimsy by bliss, Castiel wept pleasure into the blankets. Above him, Dean breathed hard, heaving chest shifting both their bodies, and warm wetness dampened Castiel’s back where Dean’s face pressed into his skin – tears or humid breath or both making wet trails that skimmed over Castiel’s over-heated flesh and soaked into the blanket beneath him.

It was a long time before the high wore off enough for either of them to manage a coherent thought.

“That was incredible,” Dean murmured. “You’re incredible, Cas.”

“You enjoyed?” Castiel asked, surprised by how concerned he was. His mouth was tacky and dry, his voice guttural and broken.
With a content sigh, Dean slid off Castiel’s back to lie beside him on the bed. The mattress bounced and hot come leaked from Castiel’s hole. He clenched around nothing and a disappointed whimper burst from him. Suddenly powerless, lay atop the wet spot left by his own release. He couldn’t be bothered to move. Dean, perhaps recognizing Castiel’s lethargy, rolled over, lined their bodies up, and wrapped an arm over Castiel’s waist.

“Do you want me to clean you up?” Dean asked.

“Hold me,” Castiel croaked. “Just…hold me. Never let me go.”

“I won’t.” Dean’s voice was a promise, undeniable, binding. “You’re mine, Castiel. I will not share you. I will not let anyone hurt you. I will not let another possess you. And I swear, I will never, ever let you go.” There was a pause, and then Dean added, so softly that Castiel wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. “As long as you never let me go.”

“I won’t,” Castiel whispered. Lifting a languid arm, he wrapped his hand around Dean’s, entwining them over his abdomen, and cuddled back into Dean’s embrace. “You’re my home, Dean.”

“Yes,” Dean breathed, nuzzling against him.

Comforted, caressed, embraced, cherished, loved, owned, and content, Castiel let his eyes slip shut. He wasn’t wary. He wasn’t nervous. He wasn’t afraid. He was happy, impossibly happy, and he was right where he belonged.

“Sleep well, my Knight.”

“Forever in your arms, my Goddess.”

Smiling, Castiel drifted asleep. There was nothing more to worry about. Castiel’s Goddess would be there when he awoke. Wherever they went, as long as they went together, they’d have family, and they’d be home.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, everyone. This one has been a labor of love for me...I've had this story clamoring to get out of my head for well over a year, and I've had a full first draft since mid December, and it's so nice to get it out there and read all your comments and know that others have enjoyed it. I'm not planning to do any time stamps for this one but if you've got questions I might be able to throw some stuff together in replies to comments? I think I tied up the loose ends.

For next projects, in case you're wondering, I'm currently knocking out words for my DCJBB, which will post sometime in May, and I'll be spending April working on my first Stucky story, which is for the Captain America Reverse Bang. After that I'll be tackling some commission fics, and trying to finish Halflings, and I'm not sure beyond then. :)

Thanks for being awesome readers, guys. I couldn't do this without your support!!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!