

And on the Seventh Day...

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Summary

So much has changed. The Republic, the monarchy, Castiel's life — they can never return to what they once were. There is regret in that, but there is also joy, for Castiel is now ready to forge a new life with Dean, free from the expectations that once governed their marriage.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Sexual content: Oral sex.

The exhaustion of the past few days catches up with Castiel during the journey back to town. He's vaguely aware of walking through the woods, admiring the shape of Dean's back as he leads the way while barking orders into the radio. He's also aware of Anna reaching for him at some point, and how she pulled his arm over her shoulder in guiding him along. There's also the odd episode of someone (not Anna or Dean) dropping to their knees and crying as they kissed his hand, which doesn't seem like the sort of thing he'd hallucinate about, so it's possible it really happened.

Castiel's next lucid thoughts are upon his waking in the Rexford hospital. He knows these walls and smells, and there's the sound of Dean's voice nearby, which is enough for Castiel to drift back to sleep while other people manage things.

Proper consciousness returns later, when Castiel wakes again. This time his body is heavy but rested, and the gnawing ache in his stomach is no longer present. There's a tube attached to his left hand, providing nourishment he couldn't take the old-fashioned way.

The bandages on his arm should be cause for concern. It means that at least one person has seen the broken tattoos and, considering the rapidity with which word seems to travel these days, there is a decent chance it may become widespread knowledge. Castiel remembers being worried about that, when he'd wanted to avoid questions about the validity of their marriage, but such cares feel inconsequential now. Lucifer's to thank for that, due to his helpful sharing with the world that Castiel and Dean were never young sweethearts.

There is relief in the truth being out there. Maybe now it will wash away the supposed value attached to their marriage, and he and Dean can simply *be*.

These are the thoughts that roll around Castiel's head as he lies in the hospital bed. The more he thinks, the more he processes other details of his location. It's not one of the wards he'd visited during his rounds the other day. It's a private room, the lights dimmed and the heavy curtains drawn across the window on Castiel's right. To Castiel's left – he grunts as he turns his head – is another bed, of which Dean is the occupant.

It's not clear if Dean is awake or not. Castiel is compelled to get up and find out, especially since his body feels as though it's gotten a decent amount of sleep, which is nice.

The only challenge in making the short trek between their beds is dragging the IV drip pole along with him, which takes some negotiation. By the time Castiel's arrived at Dean's

bedside, Dean is definitely wide awake, propped up on pillows and watching him in amusement.

“Missed me already?” Dean says.

“Yes.” Castiel waves away Dean’s attempt to help him, and sits down on the chair next to his bed. “I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“Nah,” Dean says, nose wrinkling. “Can’t sleep right here, the bed’s too... Eh.”

“Would you sleep better in your car?”

“And leave you by yourself? Yeah, right.” Dean’s not wearing his jacket, and the bandages around his torso and arm all appear to be fresh. This is satisfying, though Dean’s face is still wan from his recent excursions. Castiel takes Dean’s closest hand, cupping it between his.

“How are you?” Castiel asks. “I think I passed out on the way here.”

Dean grins. “Pretty much, not that you missed a lot. You can see that Mayor Case was nice enough to get us this deluxe suite here, and I got someone standing outside.”

“Is that necessary?”

“Pfft, *yeah*. You’re lucky you conked out when you did, otherwise your buddies would be badgering you ‘til Doomsday. Anna’s handling that, and I got Victor to take care of Lucifer and his... flock, whatever you want to call ‘em.” Dean drags his fingertips against Castiel’s palm, the touch as soft as silk. “You really should get some rest.”

“So do you,” Castiel says. “Yet you’re up. I’ll keep you company.”

“Sounds like there’s a flaw in that plan, Cas.”

“No, it’s the perfect plan.” Castiel adjusts his chair, making sure it’s right up against Dean’s bed. Then he leans forward to drape his torso across the bed, meaning that Castiel gets to rest the side of his head on Dean’s stomach, just far enough down to avoid aggravating his bandages. He looks up at Dean, who looks like he’s trying to control his face, and says, “Your absence is an ache, only soothed by nearness. There will come a time when that ache will ease, when I can be confident that you will always return to me and I to you, but that is not today.”

“Jeez,” Dean says mildly, “you can just *say* if you want to cuddle.”

Castiel closes his eyes and lets the warmth of Dean’s body seep into him. His back will probably protest soon, but Castiel will stay here until that happens. “I’m sorry for making you worry. When I heard that you were running off to get Lucifer by yourself, my first thought was that you shouldn’t be alone.”

“Nah, I get it. I should’ve expected you to react that way. I just thought...” Dean sighs. “I just wanted it to be *done*, you know? I wanted to do one thing right.”

Castiel opens his eyes. Dean smiles, but it's a tired smile. It may be this unfamiliar bed that's keeping Dean awake, but perhaps it's not that *only* that. "Is that a reference to something?" Castiel asks.

"Yeah, it's a reference to everything else." Dean rolls his eyes. "You know what I mean, Cas."

"Not really?"

"Seriously?" Dean blinks, stares, and then turns away in discomfort. "Oh come on, you know, it's... I keep messing things up."

"That's not true."

"Sure it is." Dean tries to sound nonchalant but his anxiousness is clear. He exhales dramatically when Castiel squeezes his hand. "I can't do anything right. Couldn't stop Sam from running, couldn't be good enough for you, couldn't even... couldn't even keep you safe. I mean, how fucking useless do you have to be for *that*?"

"You would have found me eventually. You were close to Lucifer's cave as it was."

"I wasn't talking about..." Dean shakes his head rapidly, as though to clear his head. "Not getting to you in time is just the latest fuck-up in a long line of fuck-ups. I was talking about that time with the... during our honeymoon."

Castiel is still resting comfortably against Dean's stomach, but he frowns. Joshua House is so far away now, and so many things have happened between them since then, and for the better. It is a strange thing to bring up now, so Castiel stays silent, compelled to know what on earth Dean is going about.

"Oh you *know*," Dean says irritably. When Castiel just looks back at him mildly, Dean groans. "I lied to you, then I couldn't even stop my buddies from locking you up. *You*. When you've had enough of that crap in your life. Don't say it wasn't my fault, 'cause it was. I could've done it different. And I've been *trying*, Jesus Christ, Cas, I've been trying to do better but it's just... I just keep making things worse."

Dean's eyes are shiny as they dart wildly across the room, and a red flush runs across his cheeks. Castiel would hold him now, but this moment feels fragile. *Dean* is fragile, in a way that Castiel rarely sees. It occurs to Castiel that Dean doesn't let himself be like this often, so this must have been coming for some time. For all that Castiel has been trying to convince Dean that he doesn't care about what happened back then, Dean hasn't let it go. Perhaps Dean needs to say it loud, to make it real, to be heard.

"I told myself I was gonna do you right," Dean says, voice a little thick. "I was gonna be everything you never had. And when you told me I was your family, all I could think was how I don't – fucking – deserve it. I'm supposed to be *better*, and I'm not."

"You are," Castiel says quietly.

“Oh come on,” Dean snaps. “I got to see Lucifer, right? He agreed to meet some of us to negotiate or whatever, and the first thing he did was show me that picture of you, and it was... it was like all my worst thinking became real. I put you there. I did that to you. I know what you’re gonna say – you’re gonna say that Lucifer did it, but he did that *for* me. ‘Cause he thought it would get to me, or that that’s what I wanted.”

“He was wrong there,” Castiel says.

“Was he?” Dean says, a little hysterically. “He offered to break the bonding, because he knew I tried to do it before!”

“At a low point,” Castiel says. “But you want to keep it now. You want to be with me, now.”

Dean deflates against his pillows. “Did Lucifer say anything about me and Benny? He said he did.”

“He told me that the two of you were having an affair,” Castiel says. “But he also said that I made a deal with you to manipulate everyone so I could become king, so I don’t put much stock in his detective skills.”

There’s a pause, and then Dean laughs, and laughs. His face scrunches up, his whole body shakes and his chest heaves with each wheezing breath that follows the sound. At long last it wears Dean down enough that he has to gasp for air and bat at his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Hell,” Dean says. “That’s not even that funny.”

“It’s hilarious,” Castiel says.

“Benny was just...” Dean pauses, finishing off another laugh, “...Benny was the only one I could talk to about you, ‘cause he saw us together before it all got weird. I *may* have gotten drunk more than once, and he *may* have had to peel me off the floor every time that happened, so I guess it could look like something else to outsiders. But it wasn’t like *that*.”

“I know,” Castiel says. “You love me. And although at time you weren’t sure of where we stood, we were married. Marriage as an institution means something to you.”

Dean’s responding smile is shaky, but pleased. Castiel thinks that it’s a blessing he’s too tired to get more worked up over this. Maybe that’s even why Dean’s sharing this with him now, when there’s little chance of Castiel getting into full argumentative mode. At the same time, Castiel marvels that Dean has been blaming himself for the wrongs he sees in the path they’ve made together, when Castiel has been blaming *himself* for screwing up repeatedly on that very same path.

It isn’t even as though Dean is fishing for Castiel to tell him that his feelings are wrong. That is something that anyone has to come to terms with themselves. Castiel thinks – judging from Dean’s restlessness that looks a lot like shame – that he just wants Castiel to know this, and to know him.

Castiel also heard what Dean didn't quite say out loud. Dean felt that he could only talk to Benny about Castiel, which is wrong enough in itself, for Dean has family and friends beyond the counting. Dean knows loneliness and alienation, and Castiel was so wrong to have ever thought otherwise.

"I'm sorry that you feel this way," Castiel says. "But thank you."

"Thanks for dumping all of my bullshit on you?"

"I didn't know you were still hung up on this," Castiel admits. "I'm *glad* that you're telling me. I wouldn't want you to bear it by yourself."

Dean's eyes are still bright, but there is wonder in the way he's looking at Castiel. There is so much to read in the generosity of this moment, the greatest of which is the breath-taking evidence of how deeply Dean is committed to this – to them. There may be fear and uncertainty and doubt in his speech – especially with regards of his own worthiness – but Dean wants to press forward anyway. It is amazing.

Of course, it's not long before embarrassment takes over, and Dean's face is flushed for different reasons. He clears his throat, possibly to brush away that moment of weakness, but Castiel speaks up first: "I still get confused sometimes, when you react in ways I don't expect. This helps me understand you better, and I *want* to understand you better. I still don't believe that any of that was your fault, but if it's beneficial for you to hear that I forgive every moment of hurt, then yes, I forgive every moment of hurt."

Dean's mouth snaps shut. Then, awkwardly, he murmurs, "Okay, cool."

"I hope it goes the other way?" Castiel says. "I have hurt you as well."

"What? Yeah, of course, I'm not holding a... That's *different*, Cas."

Castiel makes a face. "I don't think it is. Your well-being is just as important."

Dean makes a huffy, dismissive sound. This is Castiel's first glimpse of uncertainty in Dean since their finding each other at Turner Estate. This whole time Dean has been confident, assured, and wonderfully demanding in his desire to remake their relationship now that they have the opportunity for it. Castiel had been so delighted with Dean's confidence, and glad that at least one of them had a clear idea of how to pursue this, but that isn't a sustainable stance to take. Dean has his doubts and moments of second-guessing, just like any other person. At such times it is Castiel's task to pick up the slack.

"There are more ways to save a person than protecting them from physical hardship," Castiel says. "You helped me realize that it's all right to want things for myself. And that I don't need to be politic about things that make me unhappy, and I don't need to be *okay* with the wrongs that have been done to me. I am changed because of you."

Dean's frowning now, though he is also blinking rapidly and staring at Castiel's hands. Castiel still doesn't know much of how Dean relates to his friends and loved ones, but it is likely that Dean doesn't often hear such things about how important he is. Castiel also

suspects that when Dean does receive accolades, he hears it more as praise of *what* has been achieved, rather than *him* who has done the achieving. This may only be conjecture based on various details collated in Castiel's memories, of how Ellen, Dean's parents and random hunters have described Dean – describing little more than his loyalty to his kin and status as a *good man* – but it makes sense.

“Cas,” Dean says gruffly. “Can you come up here?”

“Do you need some—oh, oh okay.” Castiel recognizes that look of urgency now, and it propels him out of his chair, the IV pole carefully pulled along with him as he reaches for Dean at the head of the hospital bed. Dean's hand immediately finds Castiel's shoulder, twisting into the cloth of his shirt and drawing Castiel close enough to press their lips together.

It's up to Castiel to keep the kiss gentle, holding back where Dean tries to pull, mouth open and demanding. Castiel is awed by the emotion in Dean's physical touch, but this isn't the time for Castiel to crawl on top him, no matter how much they both would like that. Dean kisses with urgency; Castiel takes it, but keeps his responding movements soft, gentle, patient. At the press of an insistent tongue between his lips, Castiel draws back a little, sucking gently as he goes.

Dean doesn't even seem annoyed at this. He laughs, relaxes, and then he's smiling when Castiel comes back into kissing him again. Dean moves slower now, mouth languid and sensual against Castiel's. Their kisses are softer, briefer but no less satisfying for what they are, and Dean hums with appreciation every time Castiel changes the angle to slot their lips together. Castiel thinks that at this point his affection for Dean must be bleeding through his pores; even if Dean wasn't an expert on all things Castiel, he would see this.

Castiel pulls back and runs a thumb along Dean's lush lower lip.

“Would you like a blowjob?” Castiel asks.

Dean laughs. “What, right now?”

“You said that we have privacy in here.”

Dean starts to laugh again, but stops at the serious expression on Castiel's face. “It's not – you can't – that's so... *Yes*.” He bobs his head rapidly, eyes wide. “Yeah, that'd be awesome.”

Castiel returns to his seat, calm and collected despite Dean's staring at him in disbelief. Does he think that Castiel won't do it? They're in love and staying in a shared hospital room after a harrowing experience, it really isn't that unexpected that they would indulge in some intimacy. Castiel carefully flips the top of blanket out of the way just enough to gain access to Dean's pants. A cursory touch confirms that Dean's still mostly soft, but Dean did say yes, so Castiel is more than happy to get to work.

By the time that Castiel has Dean's pants open and cock out, Dean's laughing faintly. Well, it's not exactly laughing, Castiel thinks – it's more like a low, disbelieving giggle that keeps going, like an engine trying to rumble to life. He keeps making that sound as Castiel strokes

him to hardness, and then he's whispering, "Jesus, Cas, you're actually – I can't believe you – *dude*."

"This isn't indecent," Castiel says. "You're my husband."

"Yeah, but..." Dean licks his lips, eyes dropping to Castiel's mouth. "Sometimes I think I dreamed you up."

"You couldn't have dreamed me with better social know-how?"

"Why would I do that?" Dean sighs when Castiel fits his lips around the head of his dick. "Then you wouldn't be... oh God. Then you wouldn't be you."

Dean says that so simply, as though Castiel hasn't faced disapproval at nearly every point of his life simply for being who he is. It isn't bitterness that makes Castiel think of that now, but gratitude that all those points of his life have lead up to this. Dean is so happy that he's babbling and laughing in between his moans, and Castiel understands that. He understands that kind of happiness so well that he can barely concentrate sucking Dean down.

"Oh shit, oh God," Dean gasps. "You're so – you loved me from Joshua House, really? What the hell, Cas, I didn't even – I wasn't trying to win you, I just wanted to – I would've been okay with anything, how are you real, I don't – this just doesn't *happen*."

Does Dean mean that such a thing doesn't happen to *him*? Maybe he does, and that erroneous belief casts a pang in Castiel's heart. Castiel can't talk with a cock filling up his mouth, so he reaches one hand out to take Dean's, interlacing their fingers together as much as their positions allow. Dean squeezes back gladly.

Castiel's only done this a handful of times, but he's come to the opinion that giving head is excellent when wanting to pay attention to Dean's enjoyment. Dean is unabashed and open in his joy, and is thus immensely generous even when he technically isn't the one who's *giving*. Castiel drinks in the sight of him as he pleasures Dean with his mouth, following Dean's past lessons in sucking and humming and moving subtly so that the head of Dean's cock can nudge against the roof of his mouth.

"Yeah, yeah like that," Dean says. "God, Cas, that's so good, yeah, you picked that up quick."

Castiel picked this up quick because he has incentive such as this. A lovely zing goes up Castiel's spine when Dean breaches the threshold, his eyes falling shut and throat rumbling through his release. Castiel swallows as much as he can, and then pulls off and gently pets Dean's cock until Dean comes back to himself.

"Woo," Dean breathes. "Nice one."

Castiel beams. "Thank you."

"Uh, so do you wanna...?"

"No, it's fine," Castiel says. "You can service me later. I'm happy to just do this."

Dean is still smiling, but there's a brief flicker in his eyes – that old uncertainty rearing its head, perhaps – but then he shakes his head a little and sets his mouth firmly. Castiel can only say so much; it's up to Dean to convince himself of the certainty of their relationship. "Okay," Dean says. "I'm gonna keep you to that."

Dean falls asleep soon after his orgasm, which is so excellent that Castiel almost wishes that he purposely blew Dean to help him get some rest. But Castiel isn't that clever, so he accepts the success by tucking Dean's blanket around him and returning to his own bed.

The idea is to catch up on more sleep, but Castiel is wide awake now. He tosses around a few times, which is challenging enough when he has to mind the IV, before giving up and deciding to get something to eat. It doesn't seem right to use the call button just to get food, though.

Castiel moves past Dean's bed and opens the door that leads outside. There are people in the hallway beyond: Mackie, who is standing menacingly next to the door but tips his forelock at Castiel; Esper, who was sitting in a chair but practically jumps to his feet; Hannah and Victor, who were in the middle of the conversation but now turn to him.

"Everything okay?" Victor says.

"I, um," Castiel says awkwardly. "I was hoping to get something to eat." That has Esper immediately popping a salute and rushing off, presumably to fetch something.

Hannah catches Castiel's eye and shrugs a little like, *what can you do?* "He'll get you something. You should rest."

"So should you," Castiel says. "You must have been really busy these past few days. And Victor – I thought you were taking care of the town?"

"It's under control," Victor says. "We got Lucifer and most of his followers, and the Sheriff's doing his sweeps to clear things up. Actually I was hoping to see Dean."

"I'd rather you not. He just fell asleep. What's the matter?"

Victor sighs. "Did Dean tell you about Sam?"

Castiel starts guiltily; he'd forgotten to ask about his brother-in-law. "No. What happened to him?"

"He's in Michael's custody," Victor says. "We're back in contact with the city, and apparently Ellen sent a negotiating team to Michael to get him to stand down. Didn't quite take, but one of the terms was that Sam was to be handed over as a guarantee for Ellen's keeping her part of the deal."

"A guarantee?" Castiel says flatly. "You don't practice that anymore."

"*We* don't, but Michael does, and you know how he feels about tradition."

“Was Sam cajoled, or did he volunteer?” Castiel asks. “On second thought, it’s unnecessary to answer that one. I have a decent handle on Winchester thinking by now.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Victor says wryly. “So Michael took him, but so far we know, he didn’t honor the negotiations, and Ellen’s had to push by force. Wasn’t that hard, seeing as Michael didn’t get the reinforcements he wanted, but Michael’s fallen back to Council Hill and he can stay there for weeks if he needs to. It’s a stalemate, last we heard.”

“So now that you’ve fulfilled your mission of capturing Lucifer, you can return to the Capital to help.”

“If that’s what Dean wants,” Victor says.

Hannah chimes in with, “And you should be there, too. You took Lucifer, so you should be at the site of Michael’s surrender as well.”

“That is highly optimistic thinking, Hannah,” Castiel says.

“I have good reason to be,” Hannah replies. “It would help your cause tremendously, if you wish to pursue the crown proper.”

Castiel sighs. That explains the way that Hannah’s looking at him now, subtly different from the way she did before. She has always been polite, but there is additional deference in her body language, in the way she stands a little straighter and her hands clasped in front of her. At her side, Victor’s face has subtly changed too, but his is as though he’s on the verge of an eyeroll he’s too polite to make.

“Did Lucifer tell everyone that I wanted to become king?” Castiel says.

“If by everyone you mean those of us who had the pleasure to butt heads with him,” Victor says. “Charming guy, thought he’d be taller.”

“Well, I have no interest in being king,” Castiel says. “I am also severely underqualified, so if there are any rumors going around on that, I hope that you can assist in setting the record straight.”

“Yes, sir,” Hannah says promptly. It’s hard to tell if she’s relieved or disappointed; perhaps she hadn’t known what to think, either. “I will do that.”

“And Victor,” Castiel says, “I will tell Dean what you need when he wakes up. Can you wait until then?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Victor says. “I gotta settle some other things, so just let him know we’ve already relayed to Ellen’s people that we have Lucifer in custody, and there’s been no instructions what to do with him. Thanks.”

Castiel watches Victor leave, his tall form making a path for himself as he moves the hallway full of nurses, patients and visitors. Castiel and Dean’s room seems to be cordoned off from the activity by an invisible barrier apparently guarded by Mackie, which seems unfair, but

Castiel is too tired to argue the matter at the moment. Castiel turns to Hannah, who seems to have been waiting for Victor to leave.

“Dean said that there have been people wanting to see me?” Castiel says.

“Your sister’s handling that for now,” Hannah says. “I will tell them that I’ve seen you personally, and you will speak to them once you’ve rested.”

“More of that concern for my well-being?” Castiel asks wryly.

“This is different from your disappearing act,” Hannah says. “They *know* that Lucifer took you.”

“Gratefully, that is no longer the case.”

Hannah clears her throat. “Sir – Castiel, if you don’t mind my asking... Is Dean all right?”

“Yes.” The seriousness of Hannah’s delivery of that question has Castiel asking, “Did he push himself very hard? I don’t know the extent of his injuries.”

“Oh,” Hannah says, surprised. “Um, yes, yes, it was quite... It was satisfying to witness with our own eyes his dedication to your cause.”

It takes Castiel a second to parse that through an appropriate translator. “Was he... upset?” Hannah’s eyes dart sideways, so Castiel adds, “I’ve mentioned before how I appreciate candidness, Hannah.”

“I see why you love him,” Hannah says. “I didn’t really understand it, before, because he seemed so... playful, I think, even when there were matters of importance to deal with. But I get it now, he is as intense as you are. He simply expresses it differently.”

Castiel’s frown deepens the more that Hannah speaks. “Did he scare you?”

“A little,” Hannah admits. “But, please, don’t get me wrong, it was beneficial. It made it easier for us to obey his orders. And cutting swathes through the creatures certainly made Lucifer take him seriously, which was... most interesting.”

Castiel really should not be feeling a warm glow upon hearing this information. He should be upset at the mere thought of Dean being so worried about him that he’d unleashed a righteous fury upon others. Castiel regrets putting Dean in that position, he really does, but in this moment that feeling is eclipsed by a terrible glee that Dean cares about him that much. It’s not that Castiel needs proof of Dean’s feelings; it’s more about the novel feeling of knowing that someone truly has his back, for there are few points in Castiel’s life that haven’t ended in exploitation of some sort.

These thoughts must be evident on Castiel’s face, because Hannah averts her eyes politely.

“Do you wish for me to dispel the talk that you and Dean are merely married for the sake of pursuing the crown?” Hannah asks.

“Lucifer said that, too?” Castiel groans. “I guess it doesn’t really matter. Once Ellen takes custody of Lucifer we can wash our hands of all of this. But you can tell the others if you think it’ll help. Dean and I have no interest in the crown, only in being together for our own sakes.”

Esper, newly returned from wherever it is he’d collected a tray full of food items, halts in his tracks as overhears Castiel’s latest words. “You can’t mean that, sir.”

Hannah bobs her head knowingly. “You’ll be breaking quite a few hearts.”

“Good,” Castiel says. He opens his hands, taking the tray from Esper and studying its contents. Sandwiches, juice boxes, fruit, cereal – a decent selection. “The sooner we can be clear of all these extraneous elements the better.”

“But who will protect us?” Esper asks worriedly. “If Michael retains power in any capacity at all, we’re doomed.”

“I doubt Naomi will let that happen,” Castiel says.

“Naomi,” Esper says flatly.

“Well, yes,” Castiel says. “If she and Ellen wish to remake the agreement, then they’ll have to protect your interests.”

Hannah makes a face. “I don’t know much about Lady Harvelle, but Naomi hasn’t been upfront about her actions. Not to mention that it was her idea to pursue the... previous iterations of the agreement.”

Castiel can’t disagree there, for it was also Naomi who weaved the lie of his and Dean’s love story. Castiel can’t even defend Ellen, for he knows little about her except from what he’s heard through others. Yet Hannah and Esper are now exchanging worried looks that – instead of inciting compassion – make Castiel feel irritated and out of his depth. It’s not that he doesn’t want to help, but once again people are overestimating him and his capabilities.

“I still have theoretical custody of Lucifer,” Castiel says, “which means I will be involved in some way until handing over.”

“That’s it?” Esper says. “But...”

“You’ll need to talk to Naomi, at very least,” Hannah says. “I’m not telling you what to do, of course, it’s just... a petition. From someone who thinks you can help.”

“A petition to your Lord, you mean,” Castiel says dryly. “I understand what you’re getting at, but I think you’re putting a little too much stock on my influence.”

Hannah levels him with a look. “With all due respect, none of us questioned the possibility of your becoming king.”

“You should have,” Castiel says. “It’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” Hannah asks. “Is it as ridiculous as Michael being toppled?”

“I’m a liar, Hannah,” Castiel says. “Lucifer wasn’t wrong about that. I *did* trick all of you with that foolish reunion narrative of Dean and myself. It never happened that way, and it was wrong of me to stick to it.”

“Some people would call that strategy,” Hannah says shrewdly, “when you had nothing else to use.”

Castiel pointedly raises his tray. “I am going to eat my meal – thank you, Esper – and then I’m going to get some rest. You will ensure that none of this nonsense gets any traction among your people.”

“*Your* people,” Hannah mumbles under her breath. “You still hold our oaths.”

“Look, it’s flattering, it truly is,” Castiel says, “but I am not made for such things. I just wanted to help people like myself, who felt lost and displaced here. If I’ve inspired people to make a stand against Michael and Lucifer, then that’s excellent, but that’s as far as it goes. Once this is over, my only wish is to be with my husband. Leave the politicking to the politicians.”

Esper seems to want to say something but thinks better of it. As for Hannah, she averts her eyes a little, as though she doesn’t want Castiel to see the way her face falls.

Castiel has to clamp down on the urge to apologize. He understands their fears well, with the situation still being so tenuous, their fates so uncertain. Naomi still has power over him and Dean through the agreement, and although she has apparently worked together with Ellen and her folk to bring the two princes to heel, there is no way to tell where her agenda will lead. How will she treat those who have shown open disobedience to royal authority? Who will she pick as a scapegoat for all this absurdity? (There is *always* a scapegoat.)

Truly, Castiel understands Hannah and Esper’s desire for a champion, but it can’t be him, not when he can barely manage his own destiny.

“Anna,” Castiel says suddenly. “You should bring this up with Anna. She sees things that I can’t.”

“Yes sir,” Hannah says. “Very good.”

Castiel tries not to feel like a douche as he slips back into his room with Dean and closes the door behind him.

Dean is still fast asleep, and for the moment free from the cares of their current world. For all their shared kisses and promises, they will have to return to that world for a little while more, if only to settle their affairs. They will secure Rexford as much as they can and then head up north, back to the Capital, to see that side of the conflict. Dean has given enough of himself to this place – and to Castiel – so now they must see to Dean’s family. There’s no time to breathe just yet.

But soon.

Chapter 2

As nice as it would be to pack Lucifer into a care package and mail him to Ellen, sometimes the old ways are still the best ways. Castiel has made a claim on his cousin, so it is up to him to escort the prince north to the proper authorities. Whoever the authorities are these days.

That isn't the only reason Castiel is going, of course. There are also Dean's family matters, which are now Castiel's family matters.

The only reason Castiel hesitates at all is because this likely means returning to the public eye. It also means retaking his place as Castiel: Cousin of the King, and all that that entails. (Or is it former king? That part's still a little unclear.)

It's true that Castiel has always known that he'd have to return from exile someday, if only to get closure. His hope had been that he could do it quietly, after all the furor has died down and there was little chance of the general public giving a crap about his business. Castiel may be fine at not getting what he'd hoped for – the cause here is just – but some old fears remain.

Dean sees this, of course. He sees the way Castiel hesitates in loading his bags into the Impala, the way he glances back at Anna's cottage as his sister locks up.

"You can ride with Anna," Dean says. He knows better than to suggest that Castiel doesn't come at all. "We can switch any time along the way. It's gonna be a long drive."

"No, it's fine," Castiel says. "I called shotgun and I will stick to that."

"Called shotgun in my life, you mean."

Castiel blinks, sighs, and presses a hand on Dean's cheek as Dean laughs at his own joke. "Yes, Dean," he says. "Very good. Full marks. How long have you been sitting on that one?"

"No long, actually," Dean says. "Might use it again around Sam. See if he reacts as good as you."

Castiel bumps Dean's shoulder as he moves past, hauling the last of their things into the trunk. To Castiel's surprise he's amassed quite a few things during his time in Rexford – notebooks, periodicals and, of course, the collection of cassette tapes that Dean insists will one day become collector's items so *keep 'em close, Cas*. Castiel doesn't *have* to bring everything he owns, but what with the situation still so uncertain, he'd rather his things be close by in case of... well, just in case.

In comparison, Anna is traveling light. She has just the one bag, which she now hefts over her shoulder as she heads towards them. "That's it," she says. "Shall we?"

Castiel takes a deep breath. "Yes, we shall."

They aren't going on a road trip. It would be *easy* if this was a road trip, or even if it was just Dean and his hunter friends returning to the capital. As it is, they are traveling as a convoy bearing prisoners of war, and it's difficult enough to organize something like this when one has all the necessary resources (which they don't). Ideally Castiel would take for a few more days to make sure they've covered everything, but Rexford can't hold its guest tenants for much longer, and Lucifer has already tried to escape twice. Castiel is at least grateful that they've had enough time to allow Dean to recover non-painful use of his arm.

"So," Dean says, once they've both settled in the Impala. "Is there like, protocol for this, too?"

"If we had a flag, it should be displayed somewhere on the car," Castiel says. "Good thing we don't have a flag."

"Hey, I could go for a flag."

"You're not allowed to put rude words on flags. Or song lyrics."

Dean snorts. "Are you saying I'm predictable?"

"Start the car, Dean."

"Bossy, bossy."

Dean brings his car out onto the main road, and Castiel raises his eyes to the rearview mirror. Anna's car is trailing them, and behind that is her cottage, which slowly shrinks and then disappears behind the trees. Castiel reminds himself that it's normal to feel anxious.

"I'm not going to sit in Anna's car if I can help it," Castiel says. "She's going to be taking passengers among the... among my *followers*, and I would prefer not to join them."

Dean's eyes are still on the road, but he frowns. "You still upset 'bout that?"

"It's not a joke, Dean."

"People are gonna say whatever they want," Dean says, so reasonably that Castiel feels like he should be melodramatic on principle. "They've *always* said whatever they want about us, and... I don't know, I've kinda made peace with that. As long as the people who know us know that this is real, that's good enough for me."

"It used to be good enough for me as well," Castiel says. "But it's beyond irritating that some people can and *do* believe that I would use you as part of a master plan to become king. Me. *You*."

"It's not all of 'em that think that," Dean reminds him.

"It's still unfair."

"To me or to you?"

“I don’t know.” Castiel sighs. “Maybe this is comeuppance. I didn’t try to set the record straight because I thought it wasn’t hurting anyone. Except it went on for too long, and now even when I *try* to set it straight, people don’t believe me.”

“You’ve tried your best already,” Dean says. “I mean, we’ve talked to them. What else can we do?”

“Is it really so impossible to believe?” Castiel says sharply. “That we could’ve found something real during the time we were together?”

“We are kinda ridiculous, man.” Dean’s grinning, though, so Castiel has to concede defeat. He simply can’t stay angry when Dean’s so sweetly indulgent of him. “It just makes more sense in people’s heads if we did the whole teenage romance instead of a random bar hook-up. That second one’s totally not romantic.”

“But it *wasn’t* romantic,” Castiel says. “That’s the point. Feelings got involved later.”

“Yeah, I totally won you over with my singing.”

“You—you wish.” Castiel’s face goes warm at the unbidden memory from Joshua House, of Dean on top of him and crooning in that toe-curling rock music drawl.

“Don’t deny it,” Dean says smugly. “You pop a boner every time you hear a guitar riff now.”

“That would be terribly uncomfortable.”

“See, *this* is what some people don’t get,” Dean says, waving a finger between them. “This kind of easiness – it don’t come quick between people like us. At least, that’s the way it normally goes. Look, it’s not that your buddies think it’s *impossible*, it’s just that I have a certain kind of thinking, and you have a certain kind of thinking, and it doesn’t always click into friendship, let alone something... you know, more.”

Castiel makes a face. “Are you saying that I’m not your type?”

Dean winks at him. “I’m saying that some people *think* you’re not my type. Or that I’m not yours.”

“I don’t even know what my type is supposed to be.”

“Fussy, maybe?”

“You’re fussy,” Castiel says.

“Smart?”

“You’re smart.”

“Cas,” Dean groans.

“I just think it’s preposterous that anyone cannot see how much I’m in love with you,” Castiel says. “It offends me. I don’t mind if people think I’m cold or snobbish or distant, but I mind very much if they think I cannot care for you as deeply as I do. It is a part of me now, in my gut, in my bones. Why is it easier to believe that I could be as noxious, as conniving as Michael? Is *that* all I’m allowed to be?”

“Hey,” Dean says gentle. “Is that anger speaking, or fear?”

“I don’t know,” Castiel says. “A bit of both, maybe. I just know myself better whenever I’m away from all of... that.”

“You have me,” Dean says. “You know, to remind yourself, or whatever.”

That is true. Dean is a ballast, and Castiel performs the same function for Dean in return. Castiel knows that his anxieties are not unfounded, but his worries are less about what other people might do, and more about how *he* will behave when around people who make such assumptions about them. Castiel has done badly in the past, repeatedly, even when he’d had good intentions. The hope now lies in how he has Dean, who will watch his back and call him on his bullshit.

Castiel presses a kiss to his fingers, then brushes those fingers to the back of Dean’s neck. “Yes, I have you.”

Dean laughs softly. “Are you trying to get all your touching done now, before Kevin and Maggie ride with us later?”

“I’m a needy person, Dean,” Castiel says. “Aren’t you a lucky one?”

They’re nearing the town center, where Mayor Case and her sheriffs are standing in front of the courthouse for their official send-off. The rest of Dean and Castiel’s convoy appear to be near readiness as well, Victor and Bobby waiting with all the cars arranged in a massive line stretching down the main road. Castiel is glad to see that most of the makeshift camps in town appear to be cleared as well – not only are the town’s visitors leaving, but the displaced locals are able to return home now that Lucifer and his followers have been apprehended.

As Castiel steps down from the Impala to talk to Case, his eye is drawn along the off-white walls of the courthouse, down to the rest of the street with the post office, book shop, grocery store. Rexford isn’t home, but it offered safety and anonymity in a time when Castiel needed it. Castiel will always be grateful to this place.

“Hey,” Dean says, voice close to Castiel’s ear and hand careful on Castiel’s elbow. “If I gotta be the professional one, we’re in trouble.”

“Sorry. I can do this,” Castiel says. Then louder: “Hello, Mayor Case, apologies for keeping you waiting.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Mayor Case says placidly. “It’s our guest of honor that’s a little cranky today.” She nods, and Sheriff Osborne comes out from the courthouse, Lucifer with him.

Dean doesn't say anything, but Castiel knows that he would make a rude noise if he could. Lucifer, as always, looks mighty miffed, and is glaring at the silver-lined cloth cuffs around his hands. Before Lucifer, Rexford had no use for such binding items, but Bobby has proven himself ingenious at fashioning such cuffs on short notice. Lucifer isn't fully cleansed – there's only so much phoenix ash can do, when he's been working on internal bindings for years – but this will hold nicely until they get to the Men of Letters.

“Good morning,” Castiel says.

“You aren't as amusing as you think you are,” Lucifer says.

“I think he's hilarious,” Dean says.

Lucifer glares. “Don't you start.”

“Thank you, Mayor Case,” Castiel says. “We'll take him from here.”

Dean and Victor lead Lucifer to the van that will be his transport, while his generals will be placed in a separate one a few cars down. . The smaller players were sent away earlier to separate holding places at Turner Estate and other hunter locales for dealing with later. Castiel is still nervous about this arrangement, but he's only ever had experience being on the inside of a lock, so he concedes to the others' expertise.

When the van door closes to Lucifer's scowl, Mayor Case exhales with relief.

“And that's one for the history books, folks,” she says.

It's a long few days up to St. Lebanon, but the trip is made shorter by the news that filters through during their traveling.

A number of main highways have been reopened, allowing people to return to their homes. (They even pass a few groups of returning refugees, though are sadly unable to stop and help due to their cargo.) Contact has been reestablished with the kingdom, where Naomi has indeed taken control of the royal house and Raphael is apparently under arrest. Michael is still holed up on the Hill, but Ellen and the Council have consolidated their forces and are forcing Michael into repeated talks, though so far nothing's yet stuck. It's suspected that Michael is waiting for something to turn in his favor, but so far that patience has just lead to more and more of his army deserting him.

As for Sam and Michael's other hostages, they're reportedly okay. Dean's parents are near the Hill and keeping a close eye on the proceedings, apparently with Ellen's blessing.

These are all mostly positive things, and Castiel hopes their arrival will be a mostly positive thing as well.

They're greeted just outside the city limits by an escort party that's waiting for them. Jo Harvelle is head of the escort, which Castiel finds surprising, but Dean seems relieved,

saying that Ellen's choosing someone of her own House makes it clear how seriously she takes their arrival.

Jo, for her part, salutes them neatly when their car rolls to an idling halt besides hers. Her colleagues are openly staring in awe at the length of the convoy following behind, but Jo's eyes are on them.

"Glad you could make it, sir," Jo says.

Dean leans out the window and jabs a finger in the air. "Don't ever call me sir."

Jo nods. "Yes, sir. Noted, sir."

Her gaze drifts over to Castiel, and he opens a hand in an awkward wave, uncertain on where things stand after the less-than-nice last time they'd seen each other. Castiel is saved when Dean leans against him and says, "And this here's the husband, ain't he a looker?"

"Yes, sir," Jo says, her poker face impressive. "Emmanuel is indeed a looker, sir."

"I'm glad we understand each other," Dean says. "Lead the way, Harvelle."

A few miles down, they pass the great eastern archway that they would normally take into the city, except that is no longer possible. Michael and his troops came this way when they took the city, ravaging everything in their path when they made the first strike. Castiel can see the remains of where they made base camp just on the edge of the city limits, and the route they used to swarm into the capital. *Their* convoy is taking another route today, which goes through a less impressive but still functional slip road.

Castiel's next thoughts, once they're inside in the city, is that St. Lebanon under curfew is a great deal different from Rexford under curfew. Rexford is a mountain town, its citizens few, its buildings low, and its houses set far apart. St. Lebanon is a city, which requires a very different set of controls to manage it during a time of crisis.

Dean is quiet and thoughtful as he drives. In the backseat, Kevin and Maggie lower the volume of their radios as they take in the view. Castiel presses his face to the glass, gazing at the closed windows and near-empty streets. There are checkpoints every few blocks, and once in a while there'll be sites of scorched pavements, broken windows and smashed cars; remnants of fighting that passed through the area.

It occurs to Castiel that despite his indirect involvement in the royal rebellions of the past, he's never actually experienced what life is like in a big city during an upheaval. Castiel and Anna were always sequestered away whenever the king felt even mildly anxious, so Castiel's experience has so far been limited to books and hearsay.

"They've cleared the 8th," Maggie says. "We can head straight to the Tower."

"Cool," Dean says. "Oh hey, Cas, look! That's where we got married."

Castiel turns to the other window, and just makes out the spire of the temple. "Oh, they've converted it into a hospital."

“Stubborn fuckers,” Dean says. “City people are harder to move. Most of ‘em wanna stay right here, no matter what happens.”

“That’s their right, though,” Castiel says. “I recall you advising something to that effect on your radio show.”

“That’s outside, it’s totally different when it’s whisper-close like this,” Dean says. “It’s dangerous. They’re just lucky Ellen runs a tight ship.”

“Which one’s the Harvelle Tower?” Castiel asks.

Kevin points. “The brown one there, with the yellow windows. Wow, okay, they’re, uh... I guess this is the other welcome party.”

There is a guarded gate leading up to Harvelle Tower. What’s interesting is not the uniforms manning the gate, but the handful of civilians gathered around said gate in a loose congregation. These people appear healthy, and they move out of the way for Jo’s car to lead the convoy through the gate, but aside from the few double-takes when Dean and Castiel are recognized, the way they’re staring at the cars is openly confrontational.

“Protesters,” Dean says.

“What are they protesting?” Castiel asks. “Ellen? Showing a lack of confidence in their Speaker?”

“Nah, they just want her to move faster,” Maggie says. “People want their city back. Curfew’s a bitch.”

Castiel blinks, and then blinks again. He barely notices the Impala’s rolling up to park behind Jo’s car at the front steps of the Tower.

“They’re protesting Ellen,” Castiel says slowly. “For... not kicking Michael out of the country faster?”

“Yep,” Maggie says.

“That is...” Castiel struggles for an appropriate description, “...distinctively unreal.”

Castiel is feeling a little lightheaded when they disembark from the Impala. Behind them, Anna and her passengers step down as well, Hannah moving her hands in a signal that is passed down the chain of vehicles. Once again it’s Dean who keeps Castiel grounded, his presence close at Castiel’s side as Jo explains what’s going on.

“We’ve got an apartment set up for Lucifer on the fourth floor,” Jo tells them. “It has a great view of the Hill, which was Ellen’s idea. She said to say she’s sorry she can’t be here, but they’ve been yammering with Michael since breakfast. She’s probably pointing us out right this second.”

“What?” Castiel says. “Where is...?”

Dean touches Castiel's shoulder, guiding him gently to turn around. "You see the grey line? Just to the right there. Yep, there it is."

Harvelle Tower is on elevated ground, which Castiel's hadn't noticed that during the drive. The city's many buildings are clustered close together, but when Castiel follows Dean's pointer finger he can see that there's a straight line of sight through the buildings all the way to Council Square, where the dramatic white administration buildings are located. Overlooking the Square is the government's main seat, Council Hill, where Michael has made his stand.

Behind Castiel, Lucifer is escorted up the steps into the building, while Dean and Jo discuss the latest news, most pertinent of which is that Dean's parents have been able to talk to Sam while he's in Michael's custody.

Castiel waits until there's a lull into the conversation before asking, "Can they really see us from there?"

"I don't know," Dean says. "Probably just the cars. We should've gotten that flag, eh?"

Every move the royal family makes is done in order to present a specific image. It's in the way Lucifer talks to his followers, or the way Michael makes people eat with him, and now in the way that Castiel returns to the capital of the Republic from unofficial exile. What message is Castiel sending by arriving with a retinue? It is not merely Dean's contingent following him into St. Lebanon either, for there are also the northerners who'd decided to hitch their fates to their House, their following separate and distinct from Michael's and Lucifer's.

"What's that?" Castiel points. "Why are there camps in the Square?"

"More protesters, looks like," Dean says. "Jo?"

"Yeah." Jo sounds disgruntled instead of alarmed. "There's no moving them now."

Castiel is unable to take his eyes off that unexpected crowd. "Dean, I want to follow you."

"I gotta get to Ellen," Dean says. "Gotta find out what's happening with Sam."

"Of course, yes, you should go first since you're in a hurry, but I'm going as well."

Dean sighs. "You said you were cool with staying here with your... friends."

"I changed my mind. I'll talk to them first, but I'm going."

While Dean's face is pinched, Jo has a perplexed-yet-curious smile that Castiel has come to know well from seeing it on the faces of Victor, Anna, and Kevin. Castiel turns to her deliberately, making direct eye contact that has Jo jumping a little in surprise.

"I can do that, right?" Castiel says. "I'm allowed to move around as I please?"

“Don’t see why not,” Jo says slowly, glancing between him and Dean uncertainly. “Curfew’s at 9.”

Dean grits his teeth, but concedes a nod. “Don’t go alone. Take a walkie-talkie on you.”

“The usual, yes. Thank you, Dean. If your parents are there, please send them my regards, and don’t forget to use your right as Sam’s brother to request an audience. Michael has to concede or he’ll be going against tradition.” When Dean grumbles under his breath, Castiel leans forward and pecks his cheek. “Go to work. I’ll see you soon.”

It’s strange to hold court on the steps of the Harvelle Tower, but they manage it. There’s only about twenty of them now, the others either having decided to leave after Lucifer was captured or having dispersed to Turner and other refugee centers that needed help along the way. The few that have come this far are all flocked close to the Tower entrance while Castiel stands on the topmost step so that everyone can see him. Castiel still doesn’t quite understand why they’ve dared follow him here, no matter that Anna has explained over and over again that they move by example, so if Castiel can return to brazenly after exile, then they can as well.

“I’ve talked to Harvelle’s representatives so you’re all under my protection as much as I can offer it,” Castiel says. “It’s advised that everyone who wishes to stay on the premises do so according to the rules of the House, otherwise you’re free to travel into the city as you wish. I only ask that you tell Anna or Hannah before you do so, so to avoid any misunderstandings. Are there any questions?”

A hand goes up. “Will you require attendants when you see His Majesty?”

Castiel keeps his expression placid. “I don’t know if I’m going to see Michael, but if I am, I will... keep that in mind. I am very grateful for the tremendous help you’ve all given in the capture of Lucifer and protection of Rexford, but I don’t have any roles for you here at the moment.”

Anna, standing one step lower than Castiel, nudges him with her elbow. “The Square.”

Castiel frowns at her. “No one’s going to be interested in that.” When his sister just raises an eyebrow, Castiel sighs and says, “I am going to observe the protest in the Square. If anyone would like to join me, you can do so.”

For a few minutes, the listening crowd is gripped with indecision – quiet at first, and then louder as polite arguments pick up steam. If Castiel were a better person he wouldn’t be amused by this, but he’s not. Castiel is content to be inept in directing people.

“Okay,” Castiel says loudly. “I am going for my constitutional now.”

Hannah follows him, as do Adina and Esper, but the rest are happy to stay with Anna under Harvelle hospitality. Castiel still doesn’t care much for small talk, but he can pretend that he’s on a field trip with his students, visiting the famed city of St. Lebanon. In such a trip it is his

task to lead them safely through the unfamiliar surroundings, point out landmarks, and answer questions when they're asked.

Today, when they make the slow but interesting trek down to the Square, Castiel tells his listeners that this wasn't the original capital of the Republic. It was originally founded as a farming settlement and was voted as their new administrative center a few years before the Wall went up. There are still remnants of the old gates, but the city built on top of it was to be everything that the kingdom was not.

"They deliberately designed the city to be different from the royal seat," Castiel says. "Flat roofs, unadorned walls, no spires save for religious buildings. Of course, by then the continental people had somewhat developed their own identity, and they expressed that through architecture."

"And their camping in the Square?" Adina asks. "What does that express?"

"Civil disobedience," Castiel says. "Another Republic tradition."

The streets that they'd driven through earlier were quiet, but the heart of the city is bustling with activity. Much like the town center of Rexford, the locals have gathered in the Square: a large, flat cobblestone section in between the tall administrative buildings, marked by a currently-inactive fountain and little patches of decorative botanicals. Some people are sitting on pavement, others have set up camps, and others still are casually standing around with placards. Despite the similarities with Rexford – especially the restlessness of the people – these people aren't here because they've been displaced, or are putting their safety in the hands of the authorities. The Square is, after all, currently the most dangerous place *in* the city.

Castiel tilts his head back to look at the Council building. There are many windows but they're all tinted, so it's entirely possible that Michael is standing right there, blessing the Square with his royal gaze. He'd probably need binoculars to make Castiel out in the crowd, but even the thought of that doesn't have Castiel freezing where he stands. Council Hill may be a magnificent building, but it is an island, and Michael is trapped.

In the old days, kings and lords would hole up in their fortresses during times of war, usually to protect themselves and their treasure, or simply to wait out the threat outside. That kind of strategy made sense in the old Houses, which were pretty much functional towns, and had turrets and parapets for defense. A modern, rectangular building like Council Hill is completely different, and where would Michael even station his remaining followers efficiently? The lobby is only one floor, and the roof is too high to be effective.

Harvelle has also cordoned off the area immediately around the ground floor. There are uniforms stationed all around, keeping the civilians some fifty yards away from the building at all sides.

"Donations, sir?" comes a voice just off Castiel's right. Standing there is a young man barely out of his teens, trying to draw attention to the van set up nearby. Castiel nods when he recognizes the university badge.

“Where is your funding going?” Castiel asks.

“To the university,” the boy says. “We’re holding some of the people who got displaced from the first wave. It’s all okay for now but any little bit helps.”

Castiel rummages through his jacket, finding a few loose notes. “Here you go. I’m sorry I don’t have more.”

“Thank you,” the boy says. “It’s really appreciated.”

Hannah offers her own cash, but signals for the others not to feel obliged to join. “Shouldn’t your Council be providing funding?”

“Priority is for the hospitals,” the boy says. “I, uh... I hope you don’t mind my saying, but I apologize on our behalf if anyone’s been unfriendly to y’all during these times.”

“No, people have been kind,” Castiel says. “Michael is doing wrong by us as well and most people seem to be aware of that.”

Adina makes a thoughtful sound. “There was this one terrible town, where the people just kept telling me and my boyfriend to go home, but we figured out pretty quick that that was an outlier.”

“Some people are just douches,” the boy agrees. “But I guess that’s true everywhere.”

Adina strikes up a conversation with the boy, while Castiel wanders down the Square to take in more of the sights. His attention is particularly caught by the placards, through which the locals are making known their unhappiness with the occupation, most of them via a dark sense of humor (“DINNER AND DRINKS FIRST, YOUR MAJESTY”, “When you said we were gonna be CLOSER we didn’t mean LIKE THIS”)

Castiel is in the middle of reading these when Hannah draws up to his side and whispers, “I don’t understand why they’re allowed to stay here. Even if civil disobedience is allowed, it’s dangerous to be so close to His Majesty.”

“Perhaps they’ve estimated the danger that Michael poses,” Castiel says, “and decided that it is not that great. Perhaps it is even a deliberate message that they’re sending to him. If he looks out the window, this is what he sees. These are people who refuse to be polite, let alone accepting, of aggression.”

Esper, who is listening in, makes a soft noise of surprise. “A rejection of the social contract.”

“Indeed,” Castiel says. “This is the Republic. He can try to be their king, but that relationship can only exist if both sides accept it. These people do not. Perhaps we should remember that as well.”

Hannah huffs softly. “Remember to park our butts in the palace courtyard when we’re unhappy?”

“Why not?” Castiel says. “It may be ludicrous now, but who’s to say the system can never change?”

“It’s kind of a psychological warfare then, isn’t it?” Esper says. “Michael’s gotta know he doesn’t have a chance.”

“He’s stubborn,” Castiel says. “He will hold on to his dignity for as long as is possible. And if he wishes to yield, I suspect he’ll only do it if he can control the audience to his humiliation. If Ellen is smart, she’ll keep him uncomfortable for as long as possible.”

“Where is she now, sir?” Esper asks. “Madam Harvelle, I mean.”

“She should be at Speaker House,” Castiel says, inclining his head to Council Hill’s immediate neighbor, the smaller and similarly rectangular building that has only a road between them. “Dean said she’s there, anyway.”

“They’re right next door?” Hannah says in disbelief.

“All the better to breathe down Michael’s neck,” Castiel says. “My understanding is that Michael had control of this entire block, all the way back to the crossroads, but he lost territory and kept falling back, section by section.”

A local, overhearing their conversation, chimes in with: “It would’ve been better if he took the grand temple. Easier exit onto the river, if he wanted. Instead he went and King Kong-ed himself in there.”

“I understand that reference,” Castiel says. “But instead of a blonde, it’s pride that got him stuck.”

“Actually, we say it’s Ellen that got him stuck,” the local says good-naturedly. “Some of us figure that a lot of this could’ve been avoided if she and the others just, you know, stood up to him better.”

“It’s not that simple,” Castiel says.

“You can *make it* simple,” she says. “A lot of the bullshit boils down to the Council not wanting to offend Michael, right? Well, why’s that so important? Didn’t it stop being important ages ago?”

“Ah,” Castiel says. “I have nothing to say to that. I can’t criticize your Council, I don’t really know how they work.”

“It’s a lot of mouth flapping.” The local uses her hand to illustrate. “Flap flap flap.”

“That sounds very familiar,” Hannah says. “Our nobles tend to... flap flap flap as well.”

The woman smiles good-naturedly. “I am not surprised.”

“I apologize,” Castiel says, “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh, it’s Ellie.” She shakes Castiel’s hand, and nods mildly when Castiel offers his own name in response. “Me and my friends have been here for a few days, so it’s always nice to see new faces.” She gestures at said friends, who wave back.

“A few days?” Esper echoes. “Just to make a statement?”

“We’re the lucky ones,” Ellie says. “We can go home if we want to, but there are many who can’t. *They*—” she raises a hand, pointing at the Speaker House, “—have to do something about it, because they made it happen.”

“Michael made that happen,” Hannah says.

“Because he saw the flaws in our system and struck,” Ellie says. Her friends slowly wander over, seemingly curious. “He wouldn’t have been able to do half of what he did if we weren’t so goddamned selfish. I respect Ellen Harvelle, I really do, but the idea of a unified Council has been a joke for years. The House system is outdated, and all the king did was show us how badly it’s broken.”

Hannah and Esper are surprised by this passion. Castiel is perhaps a little more appreciative than they are, and adds, “The individual power bases pursued their own agenda. There are those for the Speaker, for Michael, for Lucifer, and I’m guessing countless other smaller factions working to their own ends. It made consolidated action difficult.”

“Exactly,” Ellie says. “It’s cool that they have Michael isolated now, but this, or something like it, could easily happen again if nothing changes. Lucifer could get another go of it, certainly.”

“Oh, Lucifer’s been apprehended,” Castiel says. “Wasn’t that on the news already?”

“It is, but you never know,” Ellie says. “Good job on that, by the way. We really appreciate it.”

“It was a group effort,” Castiel says, which prompts a bark of laughter from Hannah. “It *was*. To imply anything less would be rude.”

“But no thanks to the Council, right?” Ellie says.

Hannah frowns. “I think they were rather preoccupied protecting your city.”

Castiel, noticing Hannah’s tense body language, touches her arm. “She’s being critical because she cares about her government. She wants it to function properly, and part of that process is in pointing out where it does not.” To Ellie, Castiel says, “We have a rather different system, I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Why don’t you just petition your Speaker?” Esper asks curiously. “Isn’t that how it works here?”

“This whole display is a petition.” Castiel spreads a hand out, gesturing over the Square. “Am I correct?”

Ellie grins. “We’re a little less formal, this side of the sea.”

Esper makes a thoughtful sound. “That makes your presence a petition, too, sir. I mean, the fact that you’re standing here at all is, you know... a statement.”

That is true. It’s also true that only a few hours ago Castiel’s stomach was still in knots over this whole excursion. But that was before he saw the city and its people, still hurting from Michael’s greedy fingers, but standing angry and watchful. There’s something cleansing about experiencing someone else’s anger, no matter that it’s directed more at their own officials than at the external threats of Michael and Lucifer. Castiel’s never had the chance to express this kind of anger, nor have the commons of the kingdom.

It feels almost holy to be able to stand here and behold the place where their king is trapped, impotent.

“It is,” Castiel says at last.

“I, uh,” Esper says, “I wonder if he’s up there. I mean, if he’s looking at us right now.”

“That did cross my mind.” Castiel considers the thought again, now that there’s less space between himself and the building. Castiel doesn’t know if he stands out significantly among the crowd in the Square, but just in case: he raises a hand and waves.

“That is somewhat rude,” Hannah says.

“You would not have dared even say that a few weeks ago,” Castiel observes. “Let alone sound so amused about it.” Hannah laughs softly.

Ellie and one her friends – who’s finally compelled to speak up – drift into a discussion with Esper on the action that has been taken against Michael. There’s little that Castiel doesn’t already know thanks to Dean, i.e. the various Houses have contributed manpower to control the area outside the building, but they’ve been unable to force their way in. Sam and the other local staff who’ve been taken as hostages are occasionally seen from the windows to prove that they’re all right, but Michael has not.

He’s in there somewhere, though.

Michael wouldn’t do anything so undignified as to show his followers his fears, but he must know that this in one of the lowest points of his reign – if not *the* lowest point. He must also know that it’s still possible to fall even lower.

Castiel is drawn out of these thoughts when he spots a flickering light in one of the windows. He cups a hand above his eyes and squints, only to jump back when there’s a scream of metal, followed by an explosion that rattles Castiel’s teeth.

The Square erupts with noise and shouting. The building’s guards rush into action, herding the closest civilians further away to safety. Castiel feels a hand on his arm, urging him to follow the press of the moving crowd, but his steps are stiff, hesitant. His attention is caught

on the building, where a few windows near the topmost floor are broken, and others around it cracked. The smell of gunpowder and sulfur settles over them.

The radio on Castiel's belt crackles. "*Cas? Cas, you there?*"

Castiel grabs at the radio. "Yes, I'm here."

"*You hurt? Anyone hurt?*"

"I – I can't tell." Castiel looks around quickly. It isn't mayhem here; everyone's briskly but calmly moving away from Council Hill, even as debris flutters down onto their heads. That said, there are enough shocked faces in the crowd that Castiel is sure that this isn't a normal occurrence. "Everyone seems to be fine, as far as I can see."

"*Where are you?*"

"In the Square. But I'm all right, we all are, at least I..." Castiel goes through his mental checklist: Esper, Hannah, Ellie, Ellie's friends. He nods at Hannah, saying: "Where's Adina? Find Adina."

"*Stay put,*" Dean says. "*I'm coming to get you.*"

"No, we'll come to you," Castiel says. "What's happening? Where are you?"

"*Get to Speaker, they'll let you in.*"

"What about..." Castiel turns, catching Ellie's eye as she's brushing dust off her jacket. "Will you be all right?"

"What?" Ellie shakes her head. "Oh, yeah, this is just unexpected, that's all. He's been so quiet the past few days."

"*Uh, Cas,*" Dean says, "*I'm not just asking 'cause I miss those sexy blue eyes of yours. Ellen wants to have a chat.*"

Castiel frowns at the radio. "She couldn't have asked for me earlier?"

"*Cas.*"

"I'm coming. Oh, and contact Anna, tell her I'm fine." Castiel nods when Hannah approaches, a slightly shaken Adina in tow. Ellie and her friends seem to have a handle on things as well, all of them calmly checking and reassuring each other. "Ellie, I apologize, we have to go now."

"Of course, yeah," Ellie says, surprised. "It was nice meeting you."

Castiel takes Ellie's offered hand, squeezing it gratefully. "Likewise, thank you."

"Castiel," Hannah says. "Look." He follows her gaze.

From one of the newly-broken windows, Michael's banner has been draped alongside the building. The banner is a large, impressive piece of workmanship, crafted from cloth of gold that glints dramatically under the late afternoon sun. It's too large to be used for outdoor displays, which means that it's probably part of Michael's throne display set, except now he's using it in lieu of a claiming flag.

"That is the saddest thing I have ever seen," Castiel says.

Just like how the crowds in the Square were relatively calm, so too is the interior of the Speaker House. The uniformed officers are reacting to the explosion, talking on their radios and discussing what to do next, but they are not in an uproarious frenzy. After weeks of being sieged, such an explosion must be a minor occurrence. Perhaps it's even a welcome thing, after so many unproductive days of talking.

Castiel and his colleagues gain access to their headquarters easily enough, guided by people who know who he is through the lobby and up to a room on the second floor, where an argument is taking place.

Castiel could almost laugh at the familiarity of walking into an active conference, only for the raised voices to trail off as soon as he enters the doorway. The various faces turn, acknowledging his presence. Dean is there, too, and he is by Castiel's side in a handful of strides.

"Hello," Castiel says to the room in general. Ellen is here, as are Mary and John Winchester, Samuel Campbell, plus a handful of people that are only vaguely familiar.

"Castiel," Ellen says. "Good to see you."

"Likewise," Castiel says.

Dean, mouth close to Castiel's ear, quickly whispers, "Jones, Kubrick, Franklin," before turning his attention back on the others in the room. The faces may not be recognizable but the names certainly are. Castiel draws a polite smile onto his face for the Council members who acknowledge him with half-bows.

"Is this your plan?" one of them says to Ellen. This one is Jones, Castiel's brain supplies helpfully; he was at their wedding. "This is how you're going to get to him now?"

"Not necessarily," Ellen says, "but it doesn't hurt. Refreshments, Castiel? For your friends?"

Castiel turns to his group questioningly. Hannah is frowning, but Adina seems relieved at the offer of drinks and makes a beeline for the table; Esper follows her belatedly. Castiel takes the opportunity of the lull in the argument to study the scene: Ellen calm and focused, Mary and John Winchester standing together in their own corner, Samuel Campbell looking solemn but gratifyingly unable to meet Castiel's gaze, and the other Council members in various stages of concern and frustration.

"Castiel," Mary says, gently but tentatively. "I hope you had a good journey here?"

“Yes, thank you,” Castiel says. “Um. Would this be an inappropriate time to ask about Sam?”

“No, it’s the perfect time,” Ellen says. To the others, she says, “We should take a break. Get Castiel up to speed.”

‘Taking a break’ apparently means awkward shuffling around the room and consuming the refreshments laid out on a long table set against the wall. Castiel’s stomach rumbles, to which Dean rolls his eyes and trots off to fetch something while Ellen hangs back to speak with Castiel.

“Is Sam fine?” Castiel asks.

“Yeah, boy knows what’s what,” Ellen says. “Michael’s keeping his end of the bargain, too. He lets us see his hostages every day, same time.” Castiel’s eye is immediately drawn to the window behind Ellen, which overlooks the Square, with only the edge of Council Hill visible at one side. Ellen sees Castiel’s glance and adds, “Not from here. There’s better windows on the other side.”

“Of course,” Castiel says. “That’s good, about Sam. I’m relieved.”

“You know he volunteered?” Ellen says. “Part of that was because Sam wanted to play up his connection to Lucifer. Make him seem more valuable.”

“Sam Winchester *is* valuable.”

“And tricky as hell.” A quick, almost gleeful smile breaks Ellen’s face. “Sam knows more about royal protocol than anyone in this room. Loved studying it even before he got engaged to you.”

Castiel blinks. “Sam is your inside agent?”

“Sort of,” Ellen says. “It was his idea to go over there. A hostage exchange appeals to Michael’s old-fashioned sensibilities, makes him think this might play out the way he’s used to. Sam can’t contact us secretly, because that would be too risky, but he has made certain things... difficult for the king.”

As Castiel is processing that, Dean returns to his side with a small mountain of snacks, arranged haphazardly on a pair of plates. Dean shrugs when Castiel squints at him. “I thought I’d get a couple of everything.”

Castiel takes a sandwich and chews it thoughtfully. Ellen continues the rest of her explanation: the use of force against Michael has been effective, but her preference has always been on diplomacy. The worst outcome, by Ellen’s book, is relations between their nations deteriorating so far as to become a reprise of history. After weeks of the siege the Republic finally has an advantage, and Ellen wishes to move to her next proposed act: giving Michael a graceful exit.

“What for?” Castiel says, while Dean laughs around a mouthful of sandwich.

“Because kings hold grudges,” Ellen says wryly. “I’d rather his grudge against us remain as small as possible.”

“What does Naomi recommend?” Castiel asks.

“As far as the agreement is concerned, we are free to act upon Michael however we see fit.”

Castiel scowls. “Agreement?”

Dean, who has been watching their conversation with increasing interest, swivels his head from Castiel back to Ellen. “Yeah, Ellen. *Agreement?*”

Ellen sighs. “You’re aware that Naomi and I have been in contact throughout the conflict?”

“Clandestinely, yes,” Castiel says warily.

“We’ve been negotiating a new agreement,” Ellen said. “To supersede the old one, and to take full effect once we’ve taken control of our respective nations. In reaching for an accord, Naomi promised to dismantle Michael’s powerbase in the kingdom, and I get to handle Lucifer and a significantly de-fanged Michael any way that I – and the Council – want to.”

Castiel listens with a growing sense of amusement as Ellen explains further that she and Naomi have agreed not to question the other’s tactics in settling the conflict, as long as the conflict itself is settled. This puts the fates of the royal brothers firmly in Republic hands, which is highly, *immensely* disrespectful. The monarchy’s reputation across the sea must have suffered drastically, so much so that the other nobles would let Naomi do such a thing.

“It’s been mutually beneficial,” Ellen says. “Naomi cut off Michael from his resources, and that helped me get most of the Council working together again.”

“Even the difficult ones?” Castiel asks.

Ellen inclines her head. Castiel isn’t so tasteless as to gawp in the direction she’s subtly pointing at, but he understands her meaning. Samuel Campbell is a difficult one – perhaps one of the *most* difficult ones due to his seniority and closeness to the agreement. Yet Samuel is here in this room, called to the conference with Ellen’s other allies. Admittedly, Samuel also appears to be giving his daughter and son-in-law a wide berth, but that’s probably out of politeness and/or self-preservation.

“Is that enough to make a difference?” Castiel asks. “Or will it all fall apart once you no longer have a shared enemy to face?”

“Heheh,” Dean says. Seeing as his mouth partially preoccupied with a piece of pastry, crumbs fall all over Castiel’s sleeve. “Sorry.”

“Reform is also part of the agreement,” Ellen says. “Naomi has already begun work there, I believe in forming the Regency government that will hold until Michael’s son comes of age. As for here... well. I can do my part, but the election is coming up and I doubt I’ll be Speaker again. I can only do what I can during my tenure, after that it’s... who knows?”

“That’s what continuity is for,” Castiel says. “You can’t wash your hands of this affair.”

Ellen doesn’t seem offended. If anything, she appears pleased, which is mildly worrisome. “It would be easier for me to groom my protégés if I have a success of my own here, now, with Michael. There is Lucifer’s capture, but that wasn’t mine. That’s yours and Dean’s.”

“Which wouldn’t have happened,” Castiel says, “if Dean and Victor had followed your orders to bring me here.”

Dean seems to be glowing a little, pressed subtly as he is at Castiel’s side. He raises his eyebrows at Ellen, who says, patiently, “That was a duplicity on my part. I made such an order so that Michael would think we were agreeing to his terms, when we weren’t. We couldn’t have known at the time that Lucifer would go after you.”

“Seriously?” Dean exclaims. “You couldn’t have just *said*?”

“Michael’s agents were listening in,” Ellen says patiently.

Castiel sighs. “Then what was the purpose of your summons?”

“If you didn’t come, then it was no loss, we could still proceed with our plans,” Ellen says.

“If you *did* come, then you could’ve helped us the way that I hope you can help us now. Come, let’s take a look at that view.” She turns, gesturing for them to follow.

Castiel trails after her, his mild irritation only soothed by Dean’s presence by his side. Dean is in higher spirits than Castiel, and is able to alternate between working through the plate of food and jabbing Castiel in the arm with said plate of food.

“You haven’t had anything since lunch, Cas,” Dean says quietly. “Look, you just put ‘em in your mouth like... oh, blech.”

“What?” Castiel says.

Dean bites his way free of the pastry he’d just sunk his teeth in, and gingerly holds it at a distance. “Coconut, ugh. Okay, not that one.”

“Don’t waste food. Give it to me.” Dean skeptically hands the pastry over, and Castiel takes a grim bite before turning his attention back to Ellen, who is waiting for them by the larger window. “Yes, what is it you’d like to show us?”

“Right.” Ellen blinks and shakes her head. “Yes. So you know that Michael currently controls Council Hill. We’ve had talks with his representatives over the past few days, but it hasn’t gone anywhere, even when we acquiesced to conditions he’s asked for.”

“Why did you acquiesce?” Castiel asks.

“Because that’s how negotiations work.”

“You have the advantage,” Castiel says. “Michael is cornered physically, so you should corner him mentally as well.”

“He’s still the king,” Ellen says.

“He’s also a buttmunching dick,” Castiel replies.

Someone snorts loudly. It takes Castiel a second to realize that it’s not Dean or Ellen, who have also turned towards the source, i.e. one John Winchester, who is now covering his mouth and being smacked lightly on the arm by his wife.

“What?” John says quietly. “Man speaks the truth.”

“Thank you,” Castiel says. “Michael doesn’t deserve courtesy. Squeeze him. Tighten your terms, ignore his requests. It’s what he would do if the tables were turned.”

“Ah,” Ellen says. “As satisfying as that might be, the Council’s majority isn’t confident about dealing with Michael so... candidly. That little fireworks display earlier? No doubt that was Michael’s reminder to us that Council Hill is technically part of his sovereign state at the moment, and he won’t tolerate encroachment.”

“Is this where I come in?” Castiel says. “Because I’m getting an ominous feeling in my stomach.”

“That’s probably the coconut,” Dean says.

“Your presence can make some things easier,” Ellen says. “Especially seeing as we don’t have any representatives from the kingdom at all. All the senior nobles are either still standing with Michael, in our custody, or fled to Heaven knows where at this point. It’s a big mess, and Naomi isn’t going to send anyone from her interim government until we have this on lockdown.”

“I’m an exile,” Castiel says.

“You’re an exile with excellent PR,” Ellen says. “And I’m not just referring to the matter with Lucifer.”

“No,” Castiel says. “No, I’m not going to be involved with this.”

“Michael’s read your tracts,” Ellen says. “Those seditious words of yours, put into print?”

“I knew it,” Dean says.

“He showed them to us,” Ellen continues, “when he demanded we hand you over as a traitor to the state. In fact, he was *so* incensed that we weren’t taking him seriously, that he revealed his hand ahead of schedule.”

Castiel narrows his eyes. “So you’re saying that I pissed him off so much he threw a tantrum.”

“Indeed.”

“A tantrum which took your capital.”

“We have most of it back now,” Ellen says, so easily that Castiel for the first time is glad that the kingdom has Naomi protecting their interests. “There’s just that little bit more to chase down, and with you here in person? It’s perfect. He knows we have Lucifer, but he hasn’t seen his brother with his own two eyes yet. If we engineer a visual confirmation, with you as the public claimant, Michael may do something spectacular. Preferably, I want to him to yield, but I’ll settle for him throwing those front doors wide open for us.”

“You wish to participate in a prize display?” Castiel asks. “Hmm. No.”

“Castiel—” Ellen starts.

“It’ll worsen the rumors among my people that I’m engineering a coronation for myself.”

“That’s what *I* said,” Dean says.

Castiel nods. “Dean is accurate in such things.”

“A rumor,” Ellen says flatly. “Michael has to get out of that building. All his *hostages* have to get out of that building. We can starve them out, but who do you think will feel the pinch first when their supplies run out? You want Michael to be squeezed? So do I, but I have to answer to my constituents, to the Council. You, well... you don’t answer to anyone right now, do you?”

It figures that Castiel came all this way and is in some respects exactly back where he started. Ellen is asking for the same thing that Naomi asked once upon a time, for Castiel to be a prop for a greater cause. That said, there are some crucial differences between then and now; where Castiel was once just a convenient extra, his value now lies in his specific experiences. Better yet, it lies in *his and Dean’s* specific experiences, and what their relationship has become.

“Dean?” Castiel says. “What do you think?”

“What?” Dean freezes in the motion of eating another sandwich. “What’s that?”

“What’s your opinion about this?” Castiel asks.

Dean blinks, and carefully puts the sandwich down. “I don’t know.”

“Your brother is in that building,” Castiel says. “You must have some thoughts about that.”

That has Dean’s brow knitting together, though Castiel knows that that glare isn’t meant for him. “If it was up to my gut I’d scale right building right now, find my way in. But that could get Sam in trouble, and I’m kinda done with douchebag royals hurting the people I care about to make a point.”

“Dean,” Castiel says quietly.

“And I gotta trust that Sam knows what he’s doing, and that he’s telling the truth – or at least, mostly the truth – when he’s been signaling to Ellen that he’s fine. So if rushing ain’t an option, and talking isn’t going anywhere, then Ellen might have a point about provoking

Mike into tripping. *But*—” Dean says quickly, before Ellen can cut in, “—I don’t like it being you at the front. If it all goes sideways, the Council can blame you and get off scot-free.”

“That’s a good point,” Castiel says. “I’ll be a shield.”

“Exactly,” Dean says.

“Not a shield,” Ellen says. “A conduit.”

Dean scrunches up his face, skepticism on full display. “I don’t know, it kinda feels like you’re overcompensating.”

“Dean’s still not pleased about how we had to fend for ourselves at Rexford,” Castiel says helpfully.

“Then what would you do?” Ellen snaps. “Any bright ideas?”

“Make the call yourself,” Castiel says. “Take a stance and shut Michael down. Make him understand that he can surrender now, or be without dignity later.”

“I just told you I can’t *do* that,” Ellen says through gritted teeth.

“You could make me an offer,” Castiel says.

“Oooh,” Dean says. “Nice one.”

“*Dean*,” Mary hisses.

“What?” Dean says. “I’m sorry, Mom, but… Cas doesn’t owe us anything. He doesn’t even have to *be* here. He had a pretty sweet life lying low in the mountains, and the only reason he isn’t there is ‘cause of me. So… it don’t sit well with me that he has to play nice just because we need something from him now, when all he wants is to be a good, um. A good husband.” Dean clears his throat and frowns manfully.

Ellen has an excellent poker face but Castiel can still see the moment she consciously sets aside her frustration, replacing it with cool professionalism. Castiel does feel sorry for being difficult, and if past events hadn’t played out the way they did, he would’ve been more agreeable to a power display for the sake of doing the right thing. If it even *is* the right thing to do.

Things are different now, though. Castiel and Dean can be helpful, but it has to be on their own terms. The sooner Ellen and the others understand this, the better.

“You should ask Michael if he wants to see his brother,” Castiel suggests. “It’s one thing to know about it intellectually, and another to actually see a prince of the blood being held in Republic custody. He will be offended, and perhaps do something detrimental to his interests as you’d like.”

“And you don’t need Cas for that,” Dean says.

“But Dean must be involved in any efforts to recover his brother,” Castiel says.

Ellen sighs.

“I can still provide advice pertaining to Michael,” Castiel suggests. “I don’t know him well, but there are patterns in his behavior.”

“How about we all sleep on it,” Ellen says, resigned. “We’ll discuss this again tomorrow.”

Ellen excuses herself and moves away to talk to the other Council members. At least one of them – Kubrick, Castiel thinks – seems to be annoyed, but the others seem calm and measured. Samuel Campbell is even doing an excellent job of pretending that he isn’t bothered by Castiel’s presence in the room.

“Hannah,” Castiel says quietly. Hannah, Esper and Adina have been trying to stay inconspicuous in their own corner of the room, but they approach now, fully alert. “I want all of you to return to Harvelle Tower and find out the latest goings-on in the Isles. You may use whatever local resources as is necessary, but it’s crucial to obtain direct communication to someone on that side. Don’t accept anything relayed to you.”

“Are you searching for something specific?” Hannah says.

“Not really, no,” Castiel says. “Naomi has understandably been reluctant to share her accomplishments with Ellen, just as much as Naomi doesn’t need to know how Ellen is handling the situation here. But perhaps she, or Rachel, or some other representative, will be more generous with us.”

“It’d be good to know what’s happening back home,” Esper agrees.

“And make sure the Men of Letters do their job,” Castiel says. “Lucifer is my responsibility, and he must be fully cleansed. See to it.”

Dean watches in mild amusement as the trio take their instructions and make their exit.

“Anything I should be worried about?”

“No, just some general concern.” Castiel reaches over for Dean’s plate, picking up the first item his fingers touch. “I know I’m not the only one in the kingdom who isn’t a fan of Michael, but most others are too dependent on him for power. Naomi’s filling in the vacuum left behind is... There are still people over there that I care about.”

“Of course.” Dean brushes Castiel’s elbow with a hand, a two-fingered touch that has Castiel exhaling softly in contentment. Dean’s making a face though, his eyes focused on the pastry Castiel’s working down to crumbs. “How are you eating more of that? It’s just coconut and lies.”

“I thought coconut *was* the lie.” Castiel swallows. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?”

“I know what it means to say what you just did in front of your parents.” Dean rolls his eyes, but Castiel presses on, “I’m not saying this simply out of gratitude. I want you to know that I’m proud of you.”

“That wasn’t me,” Dean says. “It was you, because you’re here.”

Castiel gives in to the itch in his hands, reaching up to catch the hem of Dean’s jacket between his fingertips. It’s almost instinctual now, as is the way that Dean cocks his hip, inching closer when Castiel tugs lightly. “Really? If you’re making me responsible for the things you...”

Castiel trails off, eyes abruptly drawn to the place just beyond Dean’s shoulder. Mary is there, trying not to be obvious that she’s watching them over the rim of the cup she’s drinking from, but she *is* watching them. Castiel has been stared at by a lot of people, but this is one of the few times he’s actually felt like a train wreck to be gawked at, although he knows that he isn’t doing anything wrong.

Castiel drops his hand. Dean turns, following Castiel’s gaze and making a confused noise.

They stand there like that for a few awkward seconds, Castiel stiff-backed and not sure what to do with his hands, and Dean making weird faces at him. Castiel knows that he should follow Dean’s lead on this, and that there’s nothing wrong about Dean’s wearing their relationship like a badge of pride. Castiel also knows that he’s been looking forward to meeting Dean’s parents properly and honestly for some time now.

Yet some part of Castiel’s brain – the part that never had a chance to develop a place for potentially legitimate parental figures before – has seized the rest of his body in awkwardness.

“Seriously?” Dean takes Castiel’s hand and – ignoring Castiel’s faint hiss – gently pulls him towards the elder Winchesters. “Hey. So are you cooking up some other plan to get Sammy out from there or what?”

“As if your brother would even play along if we did something out of turn,” John says wryly. “He wants to do it by the books.”

“Making up for past mistakes?” Castiel says.

“Sure, his mistakes,” John says, “but there’s also other people’s mistakes.”

Mary opens her mouth as though to argue, but quickly closes it again and shakes her head. Castiel notes that Mary has taken position on John’s left, effectively acting as a shield between him and her father, despite Samuel Campbell being nearly across the room entirely with Ellen and the other Council members. Castiel smiles without thinking – this is not all that different from his own formal family gatherings – but quickly flushes and ducks his head when Mary’s scrutinizing gaze falls on him.

Wonderful. Mary already thinks he’s a cold-hearted snob, and he still keeps acting like one.

“So he’s gonna hang tight,” Dean says calmly. “It’s a matter of honor, right, Cas? Mike won’t do anything to Sam or the others?”

“No, I mean, yes, it’s a matter of honor,” Castiel says. “It’s a sign of power to be able to treat one’s political prisoners well. Michael should stick to that.”

“There’s also his connection to Lucifer,” Mary says. “We were guessing that maybe Michael would keep Sam close, to learn more about his brother.”

“That is also possible,” Castiel says. “And Sam is clever, he could use that to his advantage. Play up on Michael’s ego.”

“You meant shit-stirring?” Dean says. “Yeah, the kid’s good at that.”

Sam is hardy and resourceful, Castiel knows. If he’s well-versed in the ways of the royal family, he should know that there hasn’t been a king to surrender to a rival power in centuries – at least, not if they wanted to *remain* king afterward. This is all the more reason for Castiel to not get directly involved. As soon as another member of the royal family stands openly on the other side of that line, Michael will dig his heels in even more.

“Castiel,” Mary says, jolting Castiel out from his thoughts. “Would you like to join us for dinner tonight?”

“Oh.” Castiel blinks. He also realizes that he and Dean are still holding hands, because Dean’s just squeezed his gently. “I hadn’t, um... yes. Yes, of course.”

Chapter 3

It is still technically wartime, and Castiel is nervous about having dinner with his in-laws.

The arrangements are such that Dean will stay in Speaker House to be near his parents and Council Hill, but Castiel will be housed at Harvelle Tower with Anna and the others. But that is for bedding down; dinner can still be had together at Speaker, where Dean's parents have been given private apartments. It is in those private apartments that Castiel is to have his first proper sit-down with Mary and John, and it would be fair to say that this is another thing that Castiel's lifetime of experience hasn't prepared him for.

Dean, at least, seems to find this amusing. It's been a few hours since their meeting with Ellen, and they've managed to settle some of their other affairs (making sure the rest of their caravan is settled and not antagonizing the locals, among others) before making the trek up to the fifth floor of the Speaker building where Mary and John are waiting for them. Castiel may have gotten progressively quieter as they neared the approved dinnertime, and Dean may have noticed.

"You can still bail, you know," Dean says as they walk down the hallway to the apartments. "They'll understand. You've got a lot to deal with."

"So do you," Castiel points out. "It's appropriate I do this, so I shall."

Dean laughs. "You weren't nervous around Mom and Dad before."

"I wasn't enthusiastically in love with their son before."

"I sure hope you mean me," Dean says, "otherwise it'd just be weird."

Castiel can see the joke – and it *is* a funny joke – but it's only a joke at all because they are assured of their feelings for each other. Castiel could laugh, but he is more struck that by the fact that he exists in a world where Dean can tease him with confidence.

Some of these thoughts must be apparent on Castiel's face because Dean's staring back at him, the tips of his ears faintly pink.

"Dude." Dean hooks a hand into Castiel's arm, saving him from running into a wall. "Door's right here."

"Thank you," Castiel says. "Yes. Good."

John answers the door when Dean knocks. He's in the same clothes as earlier, but his jacket is gone, leaving him down to his dress shirt. It makes Castiel feel better about not changing.

"Hello again, boys," John says. "Everything okay?"

"Peachy," Dean says, blessedly pulling Castiel along and thus saving him from having to decide if he should offer John a handshake.

It's a spacious suite, with its own small kitchen where Mary is now puttering around. Beyond that is a sitting area and a cordoned-off sleeping area, and the whole set is furnished with modern, comfortable furniture. There's no proper dining space but they've set up the kitchen island such that it can fit four grown-ups.

Dean slides onto one of the stools at the island and pats the one next to him. Castiel takes the invitation and makes himself comfortable on that stool, and then looks up to find that he's staring John in the face. John, at least, is polite enough to not comment on what must be Castiel's hapless expression, and merely glances over his shoulder to ask if Mary needs any help.

"Nope, this is the last of it," Mary says, arranging the crockpot on the table. "It's all from downstairs. I simply haven't been able to do any cooking while we're here."

"That's coming later," Dean says.

"Yes, of course," Castiel says. "I look forward to it."

"Not that the facilities here aren't lovely," Mary says. "Ellen's been very generous."

"It is nice," Castiel agrees.

"Better than what she spared for Cas at Chambers," Dean says. "What? I'm just sayin'."

John raises an eyebrow. "I thought your job was to make this *less* awkward."

"No, no," Mary says. "This is fine. There's no point pretending those things didn't happen. Right, Castiel?" Her mouth is curved in a soft smile, but her gaze is as direct as any Lord's, which makes Castiel – already anxious – read a challenge in there that might not exist.

"Oh, yes," Castiel says, quick to assure that there are no hard feelings. "Of course."

"Speaking of rooms, we'll have to make yours up once we get home," Mary adds, waving away Dean's groaning protest. "Our main seat is in Lawrence, which is about a day's drive from here. Dean still has his room there, of course."

"Haven't been back in like, half a year now," Dean says.

"No one's touched your stuff," John says. "You'd raise high holy hell if anyone did."

"You'll love it," Dean says, poking Castiel with an elbow. "And you can have some real home cooking. I know you dig *my* stuff, but I'm still an apprentice."

"That'd be nice." Castiel supposes that he'll be better prepared for *that* meal than the one he's consuming right now.

He's sure the food is nice, but most of his energy is going into making sure he's not fidgeting, or making odd faces, or being too loud with the cutlery. The rest of his energy goes into paying attention to the conversation going on – Dean, Mary and John converse easily as they

catch up on what everyone's been doing, and Castiel gets to absorb a great deal of fascinating information.

Such as how John's been to Rexford before, and he knows Sheriff Osborne as *that hard-nosed bastard*. Mary and John are also familiar with Turner's, having been there many times due to their closeness with its master, Rufus Turner. At the mention of Rufus, Mary drifts off into a tangent about how she and John were initially going to get their first house much further east, closer to where they were then-active hunters minding the borders, and it was Rufus's late husband who managed to talk them out of it and convince them to return to Lawrence.

That somehow prompts John into telling a story about the time when Dean, as a teenager, got it into his head to "borrow" the Impala to teach Sam how to drive while John and Mary were away. This has Dean sputtering in defensive indignation, arguing that John and Mary taught *him* when he was younger than Sam had been at the time, to which Mary says flatly, "That's really not the same thing, sweetie."

Castiel is so enraptured by the banter – Mary's laughter and Dean's flailing and John's eye-rolling – that he loses his grip on his fork as he's cutting a potato.

As the fork clatters across the table, Castiel finds himself thinking back on the few times Dean called him *graceful* and *poised* (mostly when they were discussing court etiquette) because there's nothing graceful about the way Castiel clammers for the wayward cutlery before it can bounce into someone's face. Dean catches it, though, and Castiel lets out an embarrassed exhale.

"Sorry," Castiel says. "Apologies."

"Don't sweat it," Dean says. "Hey, let me handle that." He leans over, his fork and knife wielded expertly in cutting Castiel's meal into bite-sized portions. Castiel feels his face go warm, partially from Dean's efficient response, and partially from the way Dean has apparently shed his shoes and is pressing his toes against Castiel's ankle.

"As I was *saying*," Dean continues blithely, "it's a perfectly legit idea – you taught me how to drive early in case there was an emergency, so what if there was an emergency and even *I* couldn't drive? Sammy!"

"Thank you, Dean," Castiel says quietly, urgently, as he tries to pull his plate back. "It's all right, I can manage."

"Castiel," Mary says gently, "did you hurt your hand?"

John clears his throat. "It's *that* hand."

"Oh, yes." Mary dabs a finger to her chin, flustered. "Have you had that looked at? What am I saying – of course you have."

"It's fine," Castiel says. "It's nothing. My fingers twitch sometimes when I don't expect them to."

“You shouldn’t hide them,” John says. “Those are battle scars. You earned them.”

“Uh,” Castiel says.

“You know he can’t do that,” Mary chides. “They haven’t fixed their binding. That’s private.”

There follows a small pause that has the hair on the back of Castiel’s neck rising. He tries to keep his eyes on the plate but he can’t miss the way John’s body shifts a little towards Mary, his shoulders rising in such a way that has Castiel thinking: *en garde*. Which seems unkind, or at least erroneous, but then John’s saying in a low voice, “Yeah, because their marriage was so private?”

Mary makes a small sound of... disappointment, or perhaps exasperation. “John. Please don’t embarrass me.”

“Oh, hey,” John says. “Didn’t you say that to Dean when you made him agree to the marriage?”

Mary clenches her jaw. “Let’s not.”

“Why not?” John’s voice is calm, modulated. “We never got the chance to talk to them – hell, we never *made* the effort to really talk to them about everything that went down, so let’s do that.”

“That’s what we’re doing,” Mary replies. She smiles suddenly, and again catches Castiel’s gaze deliberate directness, “Castiel—”

“No, we’ve been talking about *ourselves*,” John says, apparently warming to the topic and uncaring that Dean has gone very, very quiet. “Because that’s easier. It’s so easy to pretend that this is some cozy get-together, that Dean just met this guy on some random hunt or whatever, but that’s not what happened. Come on, Mary, we gotta admit that we fucked up big time.”

“That’s *not* what you want,” Mary snaps, eyes blazing as she turns to her husband. “You want me to say that *I* fucked up, that *I* put our boys through the ringer. That I...” She blinks rapidly, her eyes bright. “That I became my father in the end, even after everything.”

John exhales loudly. “That’s not what I...”

“I thought he played both of you,” Castiel says. It occurs to him, after speaking up, that perhaps he shouldn’t have, but his in-laws are both staring at him now. “Um. Samuel, I meant. But he, um. He meant well?”

“Meant well,” John says flatly. “Yeah, I suppose in his head that counts as meaning well.”

Mary stands up, so abruptly that it’s a surprise that her stool doesn’t fall over. Castiel’s heart is beating fast, and he opens his mouth to say something distracting, but such skills aren’t his forte even when surrounded by his birth family. He can only gape uselessly as Mary turns away and walks out of the room, her exit pointed and dignified. John’s expression doesn’t change.

Dean is stock still. Under the table, Castiel moves his hand over, placing it gently on Dean's knee.

"Well!" John exclaims, his smile broad and sarcastic. "Welcome to the family, Castiel."

"Still better than mine," Castiel says without thinking.

John blinks, surprised, and then barks a laugh. "Okay. Yeah, okay, I see what you mean, Dean."

"Uh, Dad," Dean says, pained. "About Mom..."

"Yeah, I'll talk to her in a sec," John says. "It's grown-up stuff, don't worry about it. So you gonna show me your tattoo or what?"

"I don't think I will," Castiel says carefully. "I hope you don't mind."

John nods. "You know why Dean tried to break his, though?"

"Dad," Dean sighs.

"Yes, I know," Castiel says.

"You know it's 'cause he got to a bad place?" John asks.

"I'm aware of that, too."

"*Dad.*"

"That was because we weren't paying attention," John says, ignoring his son's mortified hiss. "Me and Mary, we thought we were seeing one thing when it was actually something else."

"That's all right," Castiel says. "People read me wrong all the time."

"May be," John says with a shrug, "but Dean and Sam are our *sons*. Not only did we fail to see what they were going through, they felt that they couldn't come to us with their problems, their doubts. They couldn't *trust* us."

"I'm reasonably certain your sons forgive you for it," Castiel says.

"And you?" This is a challenge, too, but it feels different from John than it does from Mary. "How are you feeling about it?"

Castiel has to take a moment before answering. There are a few answers that come to mind – answers that would be especially placating with Dean sitting right next to him and now almost vibrating under Castiel's hand. Although Castiel doesn't have a good read on John yet, he thinks that Dean's father is aggressively done with the lies and politicking that's surrounded his family in recent times, and that results in him lashing out to those who are willing to keep playing – Mary included, no matter that her intentions seem focused on moving forward and healing. John's question is honest.

“I only know you through Dean’s eyes,” Castiel says. “But I know that love, as much as it can be a strength, can also distort. You just wanted your sons to be happy, and perhaps you wanted it so badly that it made you see things that weren’t there. What I do think speaks in your favor is that both you and Mary are working hard to improve on that, even if you’re going about it differently. That in itself makes me want to get to know you better, and, um... to find my place in your family.”

It’s hard to read John’s expression, save for the brief moment when his eyes flicker to Dean’s before returning. There’s a familiar *is this guy for real* disbelief in there, which Castiel is well-acquainted with, but it’s not meant to be disparaging. After all, Dean’s parents have only ever seen Castiel in public settings, or in circumstances where Castiel’s put on facades that were meant to offend or disarm. Take away all of that and this is what’s left.

At last John says, “I thought your place was by Dean’s side.”

“That, too,” Castiel says.

“Hmm. Okay then, I better check on your mother.” John gives a little nod and stands up, leaving the room as quietly as his wife did a few minutes ago.

This leaves Dean and Castiel at a table with their half-eaten meals. Castiel tentatively glances over, and sure enough Dean’s face is frozen in an abashed grimace. He understands that expression, just as he understands the reasons for Dean’s inability speak up further.

Castiel may have been the more anxious one when they’d come up here, but Dean’s fantasized about this for longer than Castiel has. Dean has dreams of the future that Castiel has yet to fully comprehend, and among them is Castiel settling comfortably with Dean’s loved ones. Of course, that would require said loved ones following the script.

“Hey.” Castiel presses his shoulder against Dean’s. “I thought that went well.”

Dean’s cheek twitches, and then his eyes scrunch up and he laughs. It’s not a hearty laugh, but it’s a start. Castiel brushes a hand to Dean’s cheek, and keeps that hand in place when Dean turns to nuzzle Castiel’s palm.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Dean breathes. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, all families have their moments.” Then, because the regret on Dean’s face hasn’t abated: “Is it worth repeating that mine invaded your country?”

Another laugh. “That is so not the same thing. God, fuck.” Dean presses a hand over his face as though to rein his emotions in, which seems a little strange until Castiel remembers that Dean’s parents are nearby. Castiel isn’t the only one who’s learned that brave faces are necessary in familial settings. “I wanted it to be – why couldn’t they just—”

“Your parents are human, too,” Castiel reminds him. “They’re just stressed out as you are – as we both are. They can’t do much to help their younger son, and it seems to me that they feel they’ve let down their elder son, as well.”

Dean snorts. “I’m still sorry.”

It won’t help to insist repeatedly that apologies are unnecessary, so Castiel leans over and kisses Dean’s cheek. Castiel smiles when Dean’s eyes drift shut, some of the stress lines around Dean’s eyes and mouth easing at the touch. “There will be other dinners. And I did enjoy a great deal of the conversation tonight. I can’t wait to see your parents’ estate.”

“You can’t wait to snoop around my room, you mean,” Dean says, cracking a smile.

“A mere bonus.”

Castiel’s attended enough awkward family dinners that he would be happy to just keep eating, but Dean seems to have lost his appetite. The polite thing to do would be to clean up some, so Castiel gets up to do just that, Dean following him quickly.

“I just wanted this to go right,” Dean says, exhausted. “Can’t I have just *one* thing?”

“Of course you can,” Castiel says. “You have me.”

Dean makes a face. “I hate it when I can’t argue with you.”

The progression from there is typical. Dean bumps his calf against Castiel’s, Castiel checks his hip against Dean’s and so on so forth, so by the time John finally returns to the scene, Castiel and Dean are kissing. It’s perfectly PG-rated, the both of them leaning against the kitchen island as they press their lips together, but Castiel still jerks back abruptly when he hears the door open.

“Uh,” John says. “So. Mary says you boys shouldn’t worry about the rest dinner, but I see the ship’s sailed on that one.”

Castiel tries to lean back, only to realize that Dean’s hooked his fingers in his belt loops. So it is that Castiel has to stand there with his thigh pressed against his husband’s as he says, “It’s all right. Thank you for inviting me, John. If you could pass my compliments to Mary as well.”

John nods, and seems to want to say something else, but thinks better of it. “See you tomorrow, then.”

“Yeah, I’ll...” Dean makes a vague gesture at the door, which apparently translates to his escorting Castiel out of the apartment. John waves them off before turning back to the inner rooms where, hopefully, another conversation between him and Mary is forthcoming.

Castiel is curious whether tonight’s awkwardness is typical, but this isn’t the time for such questions, not with Dean still flinching every so often as though his brain is – against his own will – replaying scenes from tonight over and over again. Castiel understands that easily enough, so he puts his hand in Dean’s, which at least gets Dean to focus long enough to escort Castiel down the hallway and to the elevator.

“I had a lovely time,” Castiel says.

“Yeah, *lovely*.” Dean rolls his eyes.

“I did.” Castiel runs his palms gently along the sides of Dean’s face. “Very much so. I am optimistic about your parents liking me eventually.”

“They didn’t...” Dean sighs. “They didn’t *not* like you. They just didn’t know you.”

“I know that, and I don’t feel bad about it,” Castiel says reasonably. “There were times you didn’t like me, either.”

“What? No, I...” Dean shakes his head, a smile curling at the edges of his mouth. “Okay, you got me on that one. Ugh.” Castiel beams, and Dean makes a face as he grumbles, “Ugh, *ugh*,” and grabs at Castiel’s waist, holding him in place so to press a loud, wet kiss to Castiel’s cheek. “Ugh.”

“Goodnight, Dean,” Castiel says. “Love you.”

“Ugh,” Dean agrees, fingers tightening around Castiel’s waist before letting him go. “Night, Cas.”

Morning brings with it news from the islands.

Castiel’s small taskforce actually came through in contacting Naomi’s party, so after breakfast Castiel finds himself being ushered by a very anxious Hannah into what appears to be an unused office of the Harvelle building where Anna and Daniel are tinkering with a telephone.

“Please tell me this won’t get us in trouble with the Harvelles,” Castiel says.

“Of course not,” Anna says confidently, though Castiel can’t help but pause when he sees that the back of the telephone has been opened and its wiring messed with. “Jo said it’s fine to use this phone, I promise. Come on, we have a few minutes before Rachel opens a line for us.”

Castiel isn’t sure what means, but he sits down and listens as Anna explains how they were able to get through the Rachel on the radio yesterday, but she refused to share any details unless it was with Castiel directly. That pings a mild alarm, and said alarm just gets louder when they finally make the call through to Rachel and her first words through the telephone receiver are, “*It’s good to hear your voice again, Your Lordship.*”

“Oh no you don’t,” Castiel says immediately. “I definitely don’t qualify as a Lord now.”

Rachel clears her throat delicately. “*With all due respect, sir—*”

“Is Naomi listening in?” Castiel says. “She is, isn’t she? Or is she having this recorded?”

“Many salutations from—”

“Rachel,” Castiel hisses. “The situation here may have improved a great deal over the past weeks, but that doesn’t mean that it’s settled. And it definitely doesn’t mean that I’m talking to you now as a – as a spokesperson. You’re my friend, and I have been worried for you.”

There’s a pause. *“I’ve been worried about you, too, sir. For yourself and Anna, though... though I was relieved to hear that you’d found each other. I’d imagined the worst.”*

Castiel nods. “So had I. Especially upon my hearing of some of the... leaps that have been made in Michael’s absence.”

“It was frightening at parts,” Rachel says hesitantly. *“For many of us, to be sure. Though we were – your words helped a great deal, sir.”*

Castiel closes his eyes. “My words?”

“Yes?”

“Are you telling me that the tracts made it across the sea?”

“Tracts?”

“What are you talking about, then?”

“I was referring to your letters.”

“My...” Castiel stands up abruptly. “The letters I wrote to you? To Balthazar?” He’d been writing letters even before he found Dean or met Hannah, thanks to Anna’s under-the-table courier system. Anna, who is perched on the desk, straightens up sharply, frowning.

“I’m beginning to suspect why Naomi instructed me to tell you this,” Rachel says. *“You are aware that we’ve managed to install a regency here, haven’t you? You are aware that that isn’t easy? Raphael alone was – he is almost as strong as Michael, as far as the royal powerbase goes.”*

Castiel sits down and takes a calmer breath. “Yes, I’m aware. Good job, Rachel. I’m proud of you.”

“Yes, well, many of us wouldn’t have been able to even think about making such a move if it weren’t for you. And we needed to keep that momentum going until we’d completed our goals, and you – you, personally – weren’t here to do it. Naomi needed something of you to add to the voices of dissent, and your letters were that.”

“So you used my letters to call for Michael’s abdication.” Somehow, Castiel can’t muster any surprise at this. “I am officially involved with the usurpation of the king.”

“You were before, you know.”

“No, I was not, thank you,” Castiel says, though there’s no heat in his words. “But yes, good job, well done. I don’t suppose Naomi is going to come over and complete the job?”

“Oh, um. Have you talked to Madam Harvelle? Anna said you did.”

Castiel is of the opinion that Naomi is definitely listening in. He wasn’t sure before, but he is certain now, from the way Rachel’s trying to steer the conversation, and her unusual hesitation where she would usually bowl through. It’s interesting, though, that Rachel doesn’t seem to know about the tracts that Hannah had distributed. There may be an ocean between them, but Naomi’s network cannot be so dull as to not have picked that up, especially when Michael and Lucifer did.

Castiel puts a hand up, warning his companions in the room not to be alarmed. Into the phone, he says, “Yes, I did yesterday. Her terms are... they aren’t what I expected, but are doable for Dean and myself. Don’t go around shouting it from the rooftops yet, but it’s likely we’ll be able to push Michael’s hand. His pride won’t let him surrender, but he may concede to certain... retirement.”

“Oh, that’s excellent! I think—”

A new voice cuts in just then, Naomi’s words as clear as bell: *“Is that your next course of action, Castiel?”*

“Naomi,” Castiel says. “Pleasure to hear from you.”

“I’d like to gently advise against that. Ellen might not have informed you, but the terms of the new agreement are that only the Republic can act upon Michael as they see fit. You are not Republic, and whatever Ellen may have asked you to do, you are under no obligation to fulfil.”

“Aside from the obligation part,” Castiel says calmly, “I believe that I had a very public wedding to a continental man, which by both sets of laws makes the Republic my home as well.”

“Did she make that argument?”

“Hardly. As far as Ellen’s concerned, I answer to no one, but that doesn’t matter. Why are you even bothering to protest technicalities? We’re getting Michael at last. Then we can hand him over and it’ll all be done.”

“I will talk to Ellen of this. Please don’t do anything rash.”

A faint click, and then Rachel’s voice is back: *“Oh, oh dear. I wasn’t expecting that. I think I have to go.”*

“It’s fine,” Castiel says gently. “I hope to see you soon, Rachel.”

“Of course. Send Dean my regards as well. He has been – ah, I must go, I’m sorry.”

With the call ended so abruptly, Castiel can only shake his head and laugh. Anna seems to find this less amusing, and presses a hand to Castiel's shoulder as she says, "So Naomi and Ellen aren't as tight as we thought they were."

"It's not just that," Castiel says. "Naomi should know me better than Michael and Lucifer, yet she seemed to... Did you hear how annoyed she was? She knows what it means if Michael yields to me. It'd be another boost for my reputation, if I wanted such a thing."

Anna taps a finger to her chin, thoughtful. "You can use that. Play off Naomi and Ellen against each other."

"Anna," Castiel says.

"You want to walk off into the sunset with your husband, right?" Anna says. "Well, Ellen's not letting you, but Naomi would be perfectly happy for you to disappear as long as it means you don't mess up her new government."

"I don't want to do that," Castiel says. "I understand what you're suggesting, but that's not for me."

"Why don't you ask Dean first?" Anna asks.

Castiel pats Anna's knee kindly. "You can't play me and Dean off each other, either."

"That's not what I..." Anna shakes her head and laughs. "You made me your Marshal, so I'm marshaling. No offense meant."

Hannah clears her throat. "It wouldn't be beneficial, anyway. Naomi just said that she's contacting Ellen, so they'll clear it up."

Anna grins. "Or will they?"

Dean, at least, seems to find this amusing. Castiel manages to see him for lunch at Speaker House, where there hasn't been much progress on getting Michael to give up on his last stand. Oh, there are still plans, and plans on top of plans, but action is still a while coming and Dean is glad for the entertainment of news.

"I thought Naomi was the smart one," Dean says, speaking around the burrito bits in his mouth. "She ought to know you don't care about becoming king."

"Perhaps she expects that societal pressure can push me to do things I don't want to," Castiel replies. "I have a history of that, after all."

Dean rolls his eyes and takes another bite of his lunch. They're sitting on a second floor balcony of the Speaker House, overlooking the square, and the sunlight is most flattering on Dean's face. It's cheeky of them to be eating out here where people may see – whether from the square, or the neighboring building – but apparently they're both in the mood for cheeky today. Castiel and Dean may have no interest in an official display, but unofficial ones may be useful in annoying the right people.

"It's strange," Castiel says. "I feared Michael and Lucifer turning their attention on me, yet I should feel more anxious about Naomi doing so. Her being the smart one and all."

"Well, you know she's not gonna let anyone make you king," Dean points out. "So she's actually watching your back. Sorta."

"That's probably it." Castiel takes a sip of his water, and then clears his throat. "How are your parents?"

"They're okay, why?" Dean laughs when Castiel gives him a look. "They're fine, it's just one of those... They'll figure it out."

"Is it normal to talk of one's parents that way?"

"It's just extra weird now because of what happened with the Campbells," Dean says. "You already know it's only in the past couple of years that Mom's been trying to make nice with that side of the family, which, yeah, Dad wasn't so hot about. So with all this bullshit coming down Dad's thinking he was in the right all along, and I guess he feels he can be a dick about it."

"Your mother couldn't have known that they were planning insurrection," Castiel says.

"But if it wasn't that, it would be something else." Dean sighs. "All Mom wanted was to get her family back, and they played all of us for chumps. That's what they do – people like Michael, Naomi, Grandpa Samuel – it's just how they are, it's like they don't know how to be any other way. Mom – and Sam, I guess – they took a chance, and it just got the Campbells to show their true colors."

"Do you think your mother was wrong to take that chance?" Castiel asks curiously.

"No, I don't," Dean says. "That surprise you?"

"A little," Castiel admits.

"I took a chance with *you*," Dean smiles. "That paid off."

That is indeed a miracle in itself. Castiel knows that he didn't give Dean much to work on in their early days: their first meeting was driven by Castiel's selfishness, and their honeymoon was married by Castiel's warped ideas about personal boundaries. Castiel may still not understand how Dean fell for him during that time, but Dean's perception of people is astute – he must have seen something in Castiel, just as Castiel saw something in him. Castiel may be knowledgeable about how people function, but Dean understands how people *feel*.

“But I was a stranger,” Castiel says. “Samuel – he’s Mary’s father. Your mother must be hurting deeply from the betrayal.”

“Yeah,” Dean says with a soft exhale. “Give it a few months, I’m sure we’ll all get back to pretending that nothing happened. Or something like that, I don’t know.”

A less-than-ideal solution, but still a solution. Castiel’s familial experience may be badly skewed, yet it disturbs him more that such familiar elements of distance and manipulation exist in Dean’s family as well. Comparatively, Dean and Sam turned out much better than Castiel did, and that must come back to the choices Mary and John made for their sakes. From Dean’s stories, his parents had to make their own way for years, away from the influence and demands of the extended Campbell and Winchester clans.

Mary and John took on the symbol of the impala for their herald. That freedom is precious to them, and for good reason. Dean’s inherited that thinking as well, and Castiel is amazed all over again that they – Mary and Sam, and to a lesser extent John and Dean – went along with the marriage agreement the way they did. Years of refusing to compromise made it easier to relent for this one thing, for this one cause, for the sake of family and the greater good. After it backfired spectacularly, all that’s left is to figure out how to move on.

In the more secret parts of Castiel’s mind, he wonders if Mary and John will ever be at ease with Castiel’s family baggage, which is as great, or if not more, than that of the Campbells and Winchesters. Why add to the burdens that are already there?

“Dean,” Castiel says. “I didn’t ask you this before, but I was wondering...”

Dean frowns. “Didn’t ask me what?”

“How would you feel, if I became king?” Dean’s face contorts hilariously, so Castiel adds, “I don’t want to, of course, but just a moment ago I realized that I’ve been assuming all this time that you wouldn’t want me to be king either, but that’s a... I should *ask*. So I’m asking.”

Dean puts the remains of his burrito down, and wipes a thumb at the corner of his mouth. “I want to be with you, whatever you are, or become. That’s it, really.”

That sounds honest enough, but Castiel can’t help but think of how all of Dean’s scenarios for the future have involved them having private lives, with all the personal freedoms that that entails. Castiel also can’t help but think back on Dean’s struggles in their early days, in trying to accommodate the expectations of their rank and roles. It would be different now, of course, as their relationship has changed a great deal, but it would still not erase the anxieties Dean would have upon taking a public role.

“I know it’s easy to say that now, because it’s not gonna happen,” Dean says. “But I know that anything would be worth it, just to stay with you.”

Castiel feels the edges of his mouth dip down, so much so that Dean reaches across to the table to take his hand. “Sorry, I’m just...”

“*Anything*, Cas,” Dean insists. “I mean it.”

“Me, too,” Castiel adds quietly.

“Just to be clear,” Dean says, “I have zero interest in you becoming king, because it’d be dangerous as fuck, and I *know* you. You’ll want to do everything, and *be* everything to everyone, and I get the feeling that that’s not what the kingdom needs. And I’ll still want to protect you, and I don’t know what it’d do to me if I can’t. *But*. I’ll still be there for you, and I’ll do my fucking best.”

“You are very brave, Dean Winchester,” Castiel says.

“Eh.” Dean leans back in his seat, which sadly means his hand is no longer on Castiel’s, but happily means that Dean can press a foot pointedly against Castiel’s underneath the table. “Whatever.”

The tap at the balcony door has Castiel quickly pressing a hand to his eyes – they’re a little damp, understandably – and then turning to welcome Ellen Harvelle herself, an unexpected guest.

“Don’t get up,” Ellen says, brushing off Dean and Castiel’s cursory attempts to rise from their seats. She slips on a pair of sunglasses and pulls a free chair up to the table, sitting between them in facing the square. The sunglasses are a nice touch when putting herself out on display like this.

“Yeah, Ellen, take a seat,” Dean says wryly. “You hungry, too?”

“I’m good, Dean, thank you,” Ellen says. “So, Castiel, I suppose it’s no use asking how you managed to contact Naomi, but you have, and I would like to formally extend my terms.”

“Uh oh,” Dean says.

“It’s my understanding that you have no papers that reflect your current situation,” Ellen says.

“It’s a typical side effect of going into exile and leaving all your things behind,” Castiel says. “So I’ve heard.”

Ellen nods, ignoring the sarcasm. “I will remedy that. New identification, new proof of citizenship, full travel papers covering all counties under the Republic umbrella.”

“He’d get all those eventually,” Dean says. “Once this mess clears up.”

“And your marriage certificate,” Ellen says.

Castiel blinks. Dean, however, takes a deep breath and growls, “*What?*”

“I didn’t want to mention this earlier.” Ellen almost sounds embarrassed. “I didn’t want you to think that I’m using it for leverage, because I’m not. Your marriage certificate, the one both of you signed on your wedding day with God as your witness, was of course kept very carefully, in the most careful conditions, in the most secure place we have.”

“Oh my fucking God.” Dean looks over his shoulder to Council Hill. “Oh my fucking *fuck*.”

“Michael has destroyed a number of important documents, as far as Sam has reported back to us,” Ellen says. “Your certificate is just one among hundreds, perhaps thousands. I hope you believe me when I say that it wasn’t foul play. When the city came under siege, priority was always to protect human life.”

“I believe you,” Castiel says.

“You couldn’t tell us *before*?” Dean demands.

Ellen turns her head, making it perfectly clear that she’s looking at Dean. “Not many people know why it’s important, and I think all of us prefer it to stay that way.”

Castiel places his right hand on top of his tattoo arm, clutching it gently. “Perhaps we should just come out. Maybe John had the right idea, that we should just show people that our physical bond is... questionable. Our *physical* bond, Dean. Our emotional one is as strong as ever.”

“John,” Ellen echoes. “Of course he’d advocate for something like that.”

“And that would help us how?” Dean asks.

“I don’t know exactly,” Castiel admits. “I’m just relieved whenever we can stop lying about anything.”

“While I respect that,” Ellen says, “I must advise that this is a bad time to be doing that. Both of you form a single, strong unit. No one questions it, just as no one questions your loyalties despite your coming from different backgrounds. Loyalty is a private matter when you’re married. But if your marriage is questionable, then you are questionable.”

Castiel feels a chill move up his spine, and he thinks back on all these weeks of having such easy, assumed access to Dean no matter where they were or who they were with (his captivity with Lucifer notwithstanding). Marriage opens doors that way, which is unfair considering it’s ‘just’ an institutional relationship, but it’s a persistent, powerful shortcut. Of course Dean is allowed to drive halfway across the country to see Castiel; of course it’s easy for Castiel’s kin to swear fealty to Dean; of course no one questions it when they negotiate for and protect each other.

“But it’s only questionable until we report it in to the temple, right?” Dean says in a low voice. “Then we can get Michael’s fingers off our tats, make ‘em whole again.”

“All doable,” Ellen says.

“Are you asking for something in return?” Castiel says.

“I know you can manage all of this by yourselves, given time,” Ellen says. “But I would like to fix this for you quickly, quietly, and with as little noise as possible. All I want is the permission *to* do it for you.”

Castiel nods, though from Dean's frown he doesn't seem to quite follow yet. "You want to make sure that I can stay here. As a legitimate citizen."

Ellen's mouth quirks. "It would be nice if I could say that I'm doing this solely out of the kindness of my heart, considering how unfair I've been to both of you in the past, but kindness alone doesn't go far in these parts. I can only say that this would be beneficial for all of us."

"It's still a dual citizenship," Castiel says. "I still answer to my... to whoever's running the kingdom."

"Yes, of course," Ellen says. "But that's still better than you having no ties to us whatsoever."

Because if Castiel has no link to the Republic, then Naomi or whoever else in power back in the kingdom, can do whatever they want to Castiel without prejudice. Oh, Castiel still has his PR cache as a mild celebrity, but it would be dangerous to have no anchor to the Republic – and to *Dean* – at all.

"Cas needs compensation," Dean says. "Or is it restitution? One of those two, you know what I mean."

"Excuse me?" Ellen says.

"He lost his dowry." Dean shrugs. "Everything Michael gave him for the marriage – there's no telling if he'll see any of it now. You want to make Cas a legit citizen? Make him legit all the way."

"You want me to battle for Castiel's legal rights?" Ellen says.

Dean grins. "People will love you for it."

Castiel has the impression that Ellen's rolling her eyes behind her glasses, but she's also smiling. "Where was this attitude when your momma was negotiating your marriage contract? Though I suppose I should be thankful for small mercies."

"And no war prize display," Castiel says.

"No war prize display," Ellen confirms. "Naomi will request custody of Lucifer from you in person."

Castiel starts. "Naomi's coming here? I thought she's staying away until the situation is under control."

"Apparently *someone* informed her that I'd asked you to be involved," Ellen says wryly. "Which she had very strong feelings about. Regardless, I might be able to press the issue of your inheritance when she gets here. She'll probably want to move on to the next round of talks anyway, but all *I* can give you right now is my word that I'll do it."

It occurs to Castiel that Ellen and Naomi could be in collusion to play him and Dean. It's what they do – though Naomi a great deal more than Ellen, admittedly. But even as Castiel

thinks this, he realizes that he doesn't dread their possible machinations, not when he has Dean, Anna and others back to him up, and not when Naomi and Ellen's agendas are so clearly different from that of Michael and Lucifer's. *This* is something that Castiel can handle.

Additionally, Ellen and Naomi's efficiency is rather reassuring. They may prefer to go the long way round, but they ousted Michael *legitimately*, using collective power, and they'd both stayed true to the purpose of the agreement even through the worst of the discord. There are many in the world who would've just let the two nations crumble under Michael and Lucifer's feet.

Hence, Ellen may only offer her word, but Castiel's all right with that. Dean, however, seems to be mulling it over.

"Not enough?" Ellen asks.

"Still thinking," Dean says.

"I would like security for those who followed me," Castiel says. "But that's more Naomi's jurisdiction. I'll have to bring it up with her."

"You do that," Ellen says. "And I'll wager you have a great deal of push on that front. Naomi owes you more than I do."

Castiel nods. "I'll keep that in mind."

Dean is about to add something, but is cut off by a shrill metallic screech, like two blunt edges being ground together. The sound makes Castiel's teeth wince, so it's almost a relief when Dean shouts, "Get down!"

Castiel drops to the floor at the same time Ellen does, and his hands are already over his ears when the explosion hits. The noise is muffled but the shockwave rattles through Castiel's body, making him think suitably enough of the fireworks that lit the air on Michael's birthday celebrations. It's a loud noise but not terrifyingly loud – the building beneath their body feels solid and sure, and there's no smoke in Castiel's eyes and nostrils.

"Get in," Dean says, voice close. He's crouched over Castiel and Ellen, and quickly gestures for the door. "Go, go, go."

Curiosity compels Castiel to glance back even as they're rushing for the door. Sure enough, there's smoke wafting down the walls of Speaker Hill; the explosion must have come from one of the upper floors. But right now the priority is getting inside the building, to where various people are already talking into walkie-talkies and urging them away from the doors.

Dean grabs Castiel's arm, holding him steady as he says, "Stay inside. I'm going to see what's happening."

"Is that—" Castiel stops, shakes his head. "Be safe."

Dean nods and flicks his thumb against Castiel's chin before he goes, moving past the flurry of Ellen's staff in quick strides. Castiel watches him go and then turns to Ellen, who's calmly giving orders for various people to do their checks on building and call it in with the perimeter guards.

Ellen eventually notices Castiel's watching, and says, "It could just be one of Michael's regular noisemakers."

"I was under the impression that it *isn't* regular," Castiel says, recalling the reactions of the crowd to yesterday's antics.

"Not since we took Speaker back, no." Ellen pushes her glasses to the top of her head and levels Castiel with a look. "No one told you to make yourself seen, either."

"I'm sure that's quite coincidental," Castiel says primly, which has Ellen clucking her tongue. "I'm an ordinary individual and I can go wherever I like in the city, within reason. So I've been told."

"Sure," Ellen says.

"Ma'am," a young man says, a hand over his walkie-talkie. "There's hostages, just came running out through a back entrance."

Ellen takes in this information with a nod. "Call it in to Glen and get them to medical. No one is to question them until I'm down there myself. Get Jo as well – put her on the checks." Her orders are relayed, and then she's inclining her head at Castiel and saying, "You can come with me, if you wish."

"Oh," Castiel says. "All right."

Although the morning was calm, the rest of the day is anything but. Castiel accepts Ellen's invitation to stay nearby as she goes about her business, but that's mostly because Castiel's current objective is to stay safe, and hanging around the well-protected Speaker of the Republic seems like a good thing to do.

In a way, this is familiar. As children, Castiel and Anna were often instructed to shadow their well-protected uncles and/or aunts whenever in busy or high-stress situations, so Castiel knows how to stay close but unobtrusive. The difference today, is of course, that Ellen bothered to ask Castiel if this is what he wants to do. It's a small thing, but these days Castiel's mind is filled with appreciation for many such small things.

In the Speaker House basement, the newly-escaped hostages are being tended to by staff in what appears to be a makeshift medical center. Ellen's people have followed her orders well in making sure the escapees are brought in and allowed to rest after their harrowing

experience. Medical staff are moving between patients, and other staff bring food and water into the room – Castiel helps a little on that last part, passing water bottles through the aisles. Ellen, for her part, moves from cot to cot talking quietly and shaking hands where welcome, and at one point taking a hug from a very relieved young man.

There is no sign of Sam, but Castiel didn't think there would be. Even if he had the chance to run, it's unlikely he would leave the building until this business was settled for good.

Castiel waits until Ellen has completed her rounds and talked to all the relevant officers. Then he approaches her carefully, gauging her temper as he does.

"I know it's unkind to speak of this now," Castiel says, "for your priority should be on your people. But I thought I should point out that this is your chance. You have evidence of personal trauma, and you can tighten that vice on Michael for the sake of righting this wrong."

Ellen blinks, almost startled. "No, you're right, this is perfect grounds. I just need to bring as many of the Council here, to see it." Where a second ago her expression had been angry and sympathetic, now she's focused. "Good."

Castiel slinks back out of the way as Ellen calls one of her officers to her to relay a new set of instructions. His eye is drawn to the young man on the nearest bed, who seems to be trying to convince the medical staff to find his family. Castiel feels a pang at that, and averts his eyes.

"You all right?" Ellen asks.

"Yes, thank you." Castiel takes a breath. "I know it's wrong to think of these people as a means to getting Michael out. Their suffering should be acknowledged for what it is, and not what it can do for your country."

"It's both," Ellen says. "Yes, it's a cold way to think, but sometimes that's what's necessary."

"I've been too long on the other side of that thinking," Castiel says. "Um. Sorry, that was a... TMI, I think, it's called?"

"Right," Ellen says. "If I weren't leaving office soon I just might ask if you wanted a position."

"Please no," Castiel says with a shudder. "I may be unemployed, but I'm sure I'll find something more agreeable than that."

"There's always the grassroots," Ellen suggests. "Word is you like being on the ground, talking to people."

"I don't particularly like *talking*," Castiel says with grimace, "but that's how you find out what grievances there are. Listening is important. Though the mechanisms in place here are at least better than the ones at home."

"They could be better," Ellen admits.

“Yes, they could.”

Castiel isn't making an argument for the sake of being argumentative, but he feels something akin to satisfaction in the way that Ellen hold his gaze. Perhaps it's the sense that Castiel may have a hand in something positive coming out of this, as self-centered as that may be.

One of Ellen's officers signals for her attention then. Their voice is soft, so Castiel only hears Ellen's responding, “What, Michael's viceroy wants to talk? *Now?* Balls. Okay, I want you to get Franklin and Kubrick down here, make sure they're on the circle stat, and cover it.” Then she turns to Castiel and adds, “You're requested as well.”

“Um,” Castiel says.

“You can decline, of course,” Ellen says. “I can say you're no longer in the building.”

“Yes, you do that,” Castiel says. When Ellen accepts this with a nod, Castiel adds, “I'll stay hidden behind you to see what's happening first, and I'll make myself known if necessary.”

Ellen nods. “That works.”

History will tell it more interestingly, of course. There'll be no need to dwell on the long waiting periods in between, of various people standing around arguing and being passive-aggressive at each other and pushing their agendas every which way. Much like how the Rexford Confrontation (it has a name now) in its final formal form is focused on the dramatics of Lucifer's capture, so too shall the last few days of the royal occupation of St. Lebanon take new shape in the retelling.

Castiel only sees some of it, of course. He is yards away in the crowd when Ellen stands outside Council Hill, a loudspeaker held up to her mouth as she asks Michael's viceroy what he wants. The viceroy is barely visible through the glass doors of Council Hill, but Castiel recognizes his voice instantly – it's Zachariah, which fills Castiel with a petty vindictiveness.

Zachariah says that Michael wants a trade; Ellen is uninterested in anything but Michael's surrender. Zachariah reminds Ellen that they still have some key persons inside; Ellen replies that they will all be returned safely or be added to the figurative weight already about to befall Michael's head.

Zachariah asks if one Dean Winchester is willing to trade for his brother; Ellen doesn't reply because Castiel has stepped forward to ask what the hell Michael thinks he's doing because everything he's done has only served to debase him, and besides he doesn't even have a kingdom anymore so it's only by the Council's pity that Michael has been allowed the dignity of a surrender. Zachariah doesn't take well to this and starts calling Castiel names.

It's at this time, while Castiel is sniping with his former guardian, that the second explosion goes off. Later, everyone will learn that both explosions are Sam's doing – circumstances inside and outside Council Hill lead to Sam's decision that it's time to upgrade his small acts of sabotage to large ones. The first explosion was to get as many people out to safety, and the second was to cause bedlam. There is indeed bedlam.

Ellen makes the call she should've made earlier, and orders her people to storm Council Hill. It's a risky move, for without Council approval it could cost Ellen her seat as Speaker, so Castiel respects her making it. Also risky is Dean's rushing the building with the others; Castiel sees a flash of a familiar jacket in the sieging body, but cannot do much more than stay behind and pray.

Later Castiel will hear of how, after hours of picking their way through the building, Dean lead the garrison that cornered Michael and his most trusted in a makeshift throne room. Dean made some vague attempts at being diplomatic, but at Michael's insistence that the Republic owed him things and that Castiel is a lying liar who lies, Dean ran out of fucks to give, broke into the room, and used words on Michael similar to the ones Castiel used to claim Lucifer. Dean Winchester is done with homages.

Castiel misses all of that, though since he stays in the square as day leads to sunset, he doesn't miss the tall, bedraggled figure that wanders out of one of side doors as the building's being cleared.

"Sam," Castiel says.

He goes to his brother-in-law, who initially flinches and turns away at his approach – too exhausted to engage with anyone, it seems – but then he sees who it is, and lets Castiel take his hand. It night time before Dean finds them, with Mary and John, sitting together in Speaker's infirmary, and it's only Sam's injuries that stops Dean from hugging his brother fiercely.

Elsewhere, Lucifer and a few of his loyalists try to escape from Harvelle Tower using the siege as a distraction, but Castiel, Dean and Sam leave that to others handle. Anna, Jo and Hannah's flock rise to the occasion.

Later all these events and the ones preceding it will be ironed out and arranged in linear cause-and-effect. In doing so a clear narrative will emerge – a narrative that otherwise did not fully occur to those who were there and only experienced a portion of the whole. It'll be very dramatic, et cetera.

Yet while the nations will pinpoint their rejoicing to the moment Michael stepped out of Council Hill into Ellen's waiting embrace, Castiel will point to a moment hours later, at around 4 in the morning, when Dean's fallen asleep against Castiel's shoulder in the infirmary. They are both sitting on the floor since space is at a premium, and Sam is resting in a cot, unable to sleep and talking softly to his parents.

Kevin and Anna find them like that. Kevin's expression is regretful, so before he says anything Castiel cuts him with a quick, "Whatever it is, it can wait."

“Uh,” Kevin says. “But Michael’s asked for an audience—”

“*He* can definitely wait.” Then, upon registering the word ‘audience’, Castiel adds, “Ah.”

“Yeah.” Anna crouches down to place a warm hand on Castiel’s knee. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Castiel says. “Why are you still up? You should be resting.”

“Just clearing up some things.” Anna inclines her head, and when Castiel nods, she shimmies up to Castiel’s side that’s not currently occupied by Dean. “Just thought I’d see how it’s going, before everything else kicks in. You know how it is, once the dust settles down.”

Castiel nods, familiar enough with the practice of everyone trying to blame everyone else once the fighting is over. “Naomi will be coming over soon.”

“And she will have heard,” Anna says. “About the tracts, and about the belief some have that you’ve been angling for chance to becoming king.”

“What’s she going to do?” Castiel says. “Exile me?”

“Funny.”

“Anna.” Castiel takes her hand and squeezes it. “You’ll always be my big sister. You don’t need to prove anything to anyone.”

“I’m not—” Anna sighs. “You’re the one who put me in charge.”

“Because I trust you,” Castiel says. “And because I know I can’t handle everything by myself. That doesn’t mean I want you to handle everything by yourself.”

“Dude,” Dean says, face still pressed to Castiel’s shoulder. “She’s trying to make up for all that other stuff.”

“Other stuff?” Castiel echoes.

“You know.” Dean yawns and snuggles in closer. “Not being there when it mattered, so you got caught up in all this bullcrap by your lonesome.”

“Go to sleep, Dean,” Anna says.

“Just saying,” Dean says groggily. “I got a baby brother, too.”

From the nearby cot, Sam says loudly, “I appreciate the sentiment, but maybe don’t compare me to the guy you’re necking, okay, Dean?”

“Mmm,” Dean murmurs.

“Hey, Sam,” Anna says.

“Oh, *now* you say hey,” Sam says with a laugh. “Thought you didn’t notice me over here.”

“Hard to miss you,” Anna says. “Hello.”

“Cas’s sister, Anna,” Sam says. Castiel can’t see Mary and John very well from this angle, but he assumes that they’re making eye contact with Anna, who has risen up to presumably shake their hands. “She’s the one who helped me get back to Dean.”

“I do like delivering things,” Anna says.

“Nice to finally meet you,” Mary says. “Been hearing a lot about you.”

“Likewise,” Anna says, with such easy warmth that Castiel almost feels jealous. “It’s a shame this is what it takes to make that happen. I should’ve been there for my brother’s wedding.”

“Hey, high five on that,” Sam says brightly.

It does feel strange to have Anna and Dean’s family in the same place, but it’s the kind of strangeness that Castiel can already see in his mind’s eye giving way to other emotions. Castiel loves his sister, so obviously Dean’s parents will love her as well, and from there Castiel’s worries about his fitting in with Dean’s family are suddenly perfectly surmountable.

So Castiel smiles, tightens his hold around Dean, and is happy.

Castiel continues to feel buoyant in the few days that follow.

It’s true that these are busy days, with all hands on deck to go through the recovered Council Hill floor by floor, and help the city forward in its recovery, and manage the royal guests in custody as befitting their station. Even so, it is clear to all that this is the turning point. People may argue over the finer details, on whether Michael surrendered or was captured, or what role Council must play in moving on, but it remains that the royal cause is dead in the water. Castiel is grateful for a great many things that have happened in recent times, and he is glad to be able to add this one on top.

It is due to these good spirits that Castiel is agreeable to meet with Michael as per his request and following Ellen’s conditions. Dean comes along, naturally, though he grumbles at Michael’s being given his own luxury suite in the Harvelle Tower after everything.

“It’s to cover their bases,” Castiel says, as they wait outside the heavily-manned doors – the line of hunters guarding the former king almost runs right down the corridor to the stairs. “Prisoner or no, it wouldn’t do to offend the symbol of the sovereign state.”

“I guess I’m just thankful he didn’t get the penthouse,” Dean says. “You okay?”

“Yes,” Castiel says, frowning. “Why do you ask?”

“This is a big thing.” Dean gestures at the doors in front of them. “Coming to see him now, after everything that’s gone down.”

“You’re the one who went and *claimed* him.”

“But I don’t *care*,” Dean says with a laugh. “He’s just some guy to me. But he’s your... lots of things. It’s gotta mess with your head some, to have the tables turned like this.”

Castiel considers this. “I’m not sure if it does. Any respect I might have had for him is long gone, and my worry of what he can do to me are, well...” He smiles. “You laid those to rest. My hero.”

Dean rolls his eyes dramatically. “Yeah, I totally did it just to be your hero.”

“I knew it,” Castiel says.

The doors open just then, Kevin peeking out to wave at them to enter. Dean’s still making that face like doesn’t understand why they haven’t just thrown Michael in a cell and be done with it, but he follows politely when Castiel enters the room.

It’s a large suite inside, but it’s no throne room. Guards in Harvelle livery almost outnumber the furniture, and Ellen herself is in the lounge with her staff. Michael is visible through a wide partition, sitting on the edge of a canopy bed in the sleeping area. He is flanked by people who appear to be performing the duty of serving him, but they’re wearing Harvelle uniforms as well. Considering how Michael seems to have chosen the bedroom as his sanctuary, Castiel is surprised Ellen hasn’t done the honor of giving him a coat of arms to hang.

“I asked to see you two days ago,” Michael says.

“I’ve been busy,” Castiel replies.

Michael clenches his jaw. If this were a normal meeting Castiel would come forward and kneel, but that protocol’s gone to the wind. Castiel stands just beyond the bedroom partition and crosses his hands in front of him.

“Did you want something?” Castiel asks.

Michael barks a harsh laugh. “I just thought I’d set my eyes upon your face before you take my crown. It is always passed from one to another in person, even in times of war.”

“In that case, shouldn’t you be passing it to my husband?” Castiel says, while Dean chokes. “He is your conqueror, after all. Technically. Sort of.”

“Funny,” Michael says. “I suppose you can afford a sense of humor now.”

“That I can,” Castiel agrees.

It’s been months since the last time they saw each other. Castiel wonders what Michael sees, and if he’s disappointed. Castiel knows *he’s* a little disappointed – he’d rather expected

Michael to lose some of his looks and stature after the weeks of his attempted invasion of the Republic. But Michael is the same as always, though his hair's a little longer, and his clothes less ostentatious.

"How long?" Michael asks. "How long have you been conspiring against me? I deserve to know."

Castiel looks at Ellen, who just shrugs. "Has no one cured you of that fiction? I have no interest in being king, and never have."

"That's an official statement," Dean says, more to the room at large than Michael. "Y'all heard that. Witnesses."

"Your husband put his hand upon me," Michael says. "And you put yours upon my brother. And you have the gall to say that you are too *good* for the holy crown?"

"Your son Michael the Younger gets the crown," Castiel says. "As is his right."

"Is he still harping on that nonsense?"

Michael starts in surprise, while Castiel and Dean merely turn towards the new voice. There is a second set of doors at the other side of the suite, and through it Lucifer is now being escorted, his hands shackled in front of him. Victor is holding the chain, and he nods at Dean and Castiel.

"Still going on about how you don't want to be king?" Lucifer asks. "Looking good there, brother."

Michael stands up. "What is this?" The guards nearest to him draw up to attention. "Harvelle!"

"Family reunion," Ellen says calmly.

"I didn't ask for his," Michael says.

"You can presume that I don't care," Ellen replies. "This started because of you, and now we are putting an end to it officially, today, and to be captured on paper and recorded by my secretaries, so there can be no doubt whatsoever as to the final outcome."

"Why are *they* here?" Lucifer says.

"Castiel and Dean have custody," Ellen says. "There will be trials later, of course, but this is for the immediate return of the city, and I would like to end marshal law, if you don't mind."

Lucifer is smiling at his brother, who seems just about capable of expelling steam from his ears. "Did this little one best you as well? *I've* been out the game too long but what's your excuse, Michael?"

"I do not," Michael says through gritted teeth, "have to tolerate this abomination in my presence."

“Fine words,” Lucifer says. “How did you hold on that crown of yours so long, if it toppled so easily? Father would be ashamed.”

“Not your father,” Michael says. “You have no right to call Father the one you raised your sword against.”

“Gentlemen,” Ellen says firmly. “You will have leave to call each other names soon enough. But for now I would like you to formally acknowledge your positions – as they were, and as they are now. I am of course working under the assumption that you’re both intelligent enough to know that whatever happens to you next rests entirely on your behavior now. If I may remind you, the Council has finally granted me leave to process you as I see fit, following Monday’s fracas.”

Castiel understands just then what Ellen has done. Michael and Lucifer in the same place immediately defangs them both, stripping down the scale of their vendetta to its simplest form: a brotherly rivalry. Without armies and spies and glorious trappings of royalty surrounding them, they’re just regular men. The unimpressed faces of Ellen’s staff – Kevin, especially, who has a tendency to be awed – are proof positive of the effectiveness of what Ellen’s done here.

Then there is Dean. Castiel looks at his husband, and he has the bemused expression of one faced with a train-wreck. Castiel slips his hand into Dean’s, and smiles when Dean looks at him in surprise.

“What?” Dean says quietly.

“Just thankful.” That so many of his old fears have unraveled thus. “For many things.”

“So!” Ellen says loudly, apparently cutting through another series of jibes between Michael and Lucifer. “This is indeed functional, not ceremonial. So either one of you may begin. Or maybe Castiel will.”

“I came into it quite late,” Castiel says.

“Is anyone really still buying this ingénue shtick?” Lucifer says. “It’s very tiresome.”

Castiel gives Lucifer a look. “It started when Naomi came to visit me to present a proposal from my cousin, Michael the King. Shall we sit? This may take a while.”

“Yes, please do,” Ellen says, gesturing at a set of free chairs for him and Dean. “Everything is of course being recorded.”

“It did not start at the proposal,” Michael says. “It started when *Lucifer* rose against his king.”

Lucifer clucks his tongue. “It started when Michael was born a pompous *ass*.”

“You know we don’t care, right?” Dean says, his voice so unexpected that the royal brothers are stunned to silence. “Your bullshit is *your* bullshit. *This* is a statement on what’s happened

on continental ground. So I think Lucifer could start, since he's the one who's been *fucking with our borders for years*."

"Dean," Ellen says.

"You can quote me on that," Dean replies.

Castiel beams and presses his shoulder against Dean's.

"Christ," Lucifer says.

"I'm fine with starting," Castiel says amiably.

He's given statements before. In fact, one of his earliest memories was sitting at a table with various stone-faced men and women to tell them what he remembered of his parents (which wasn't much). Although the stone-faced persons in front of them now are none other than the infamous royal brothers, today's session is significantly easier. Of course it helps that Dean is here as well, and fully focused on getting the job done.

"Keep going," Dean says to Castiel. "You were saying about Naomi?"

"Right," Castiel says. "Yes, it started when she presented a proposal to me on Michael's behalf. My understanding was that Michael wished to pursue a comprehensive accord with the Republic, and as a... personal binding mechanism of that accord, he wished me to marry a representative of the Republic. I would like to state for the record that I had been away from court for just over ten years at the time, and thus had no political status whatsoever. Isn't that right, cousin?"

Michael's glare isn't impressive as it used to be, and it is even less so when Lucifer barks a laugh.

"He can dispute that later," Ellen says. "Continue."

All and all, the shared statements take a few hours to complete. Castiel only takes a small portion of those hours, mainly because he hadn't known what was going on most of the time. Then it's Dean's turn, and he starts from Samuel Campbell's pushing Sam's candidacy for the wedding against Dean's protests. Castiel knows most of this already; the only new information is the bit where Dean apparently wanted to lead a strike against Michael in the early days of the invasion, but was thwarted due to lack of manpower.

Michael refuses to go next, but Lucifer is more than glad to, apparently gleeful for the opportunity to look Dean in the eye as he regales the tale of his refreshing friendship with young Sam Winchester, whose lightning-quick mind apparently impressed everyone in Lucifer's party, so much so that Lucifer was considering marrying him outright for the sake of the cause. (Castiel holds Dean's hand for this part, and not only to prevent Dean from lunging across the space to wring Lucifer's neck.) Lucifer has 'kind' words for the Campbells as well, for keeping him informed through the marriage discussions, though he's also glad to name prominent names in Michael's court – Uriel among them – for being instrumental to his cause.

“Don’t worry,” Ellen says, when she sees Michael’s expression. “I’m not taking his word for it.”

Lucifer’s statement inspires Michael to make his, though he makes it clear to all that he believes the entire thing undignified. Where Lucifer relishes sharing his accomplishments, Michael is clipped and terse, and only mentions things that they already know about – his starting the agreement for the sake of finding Lucifer, the initial beachhead using Castiel as an excuse, the invasion. Ellen tries to prompt him further with questions, and although he deflects those, it’s already an accomplishment for Michael to even admit the invasion was premeditated at all.

“And,” Ellen says, browsing the notes in front of her, “at one point did you make the decision to take custody of Dean and Castiel as figureheads for your incursion?”

“Irrelevant,” Michael says.

“I’d say it isn’t,” Ellen replies. “I’m aware that you tried to get them to shorten their honeymoon for the sake of presenting themselves at your court. Was that part of your initial plan, or did you speed up your timeline due to public response to their union?”

Michael makes a bored sound. “Heartily irrelevant. What *is* relevant is that although this is supposedly a session of sharing, you have done no such thing. Will you not offer anything of your own, Madam, or is that beneath you?”

“You’re not going to get much else out of him when he gets like this,” Lucifer says.

“Any implied familiarity on Lucifer’s part towards me is an illusion,” Michael says.

Dean whispers, quietly enough only that Castiel can hear him, “This should feel more surreal than it is.”

“It isn’t?” Castiel whispers back.

“Nah,” Dean says. “Just feels good to know that family crap is the same everywhere. Fuck, I’m hungry, is it dinner yet?”

“Look,” Ellen says loudly, drawing their attention back to her. “I will be making a statement of my own but I thought that considering how both of you enjoy theatrics so much, you might enjoy this first.” She nods at Kevin, who stands up and makes his way to the doors.

Castiel glances at his watch. She’s a little late, but he supposes it couldn’t be helped.

This time when the doors are opened, it’s Naomi who steps through them, as prim and alert as she was when she traipsed her way into Castiel’s university all those months ago. To look at her, one wouldn’t guess that she’d masterminded the overturn of a millennia-old institution of rule, but that’s Naomi for you. Lucifer snorts at the sight of her, while Michael lets out a low, displeased hiss.

Castiel acknowledges Naomi with a nod, but breaks into a smile when her staff follow behind her – Rachel among them. Rachel has a professional expression that mirrors Naomi’s, but her

eyes are warm when they meet Castiel's.

As for Naomi, she runs a hand down the front of her blazer and smiles at the royal brothers.
“Excellent. What did I miss?”

“Uh.” Sam scratches the back of his neck. “I know this might be really tactless, but do you know if I’ll get a pardon?”

Castiel tilts his head. “For?”

“You know, for...” Sam flaps a hand in the air, which causes the IV attached to it to almost smack Castiel in the face. “For being complicit with Lucifer and... all that. I mean, they’ve been letting me run around because I have intel and things like that, but now with Naomi here, I’m wondering... Jesus, I’m so selfish.”

“It’s not selfish,” Castiel says. “Sam, believe me, it’s not. Unfortunately I don’t know the answer to your question, but I can find out. I do know that there was no mention of bringing you in and I honestly don’t think it’s likely. Ellen has the Council majority behind her now, so I doubt she’d threaten that by holding the hero of the siege accountable for past mistakes.”

Sam’s face is pinched. “I didn’t do it just to cancel things out.”

“I know you didn’t,” Castiel says. “But if it does, why not take it?”

The infirmary in Speaker Hill is still busy, but less so now that most of its patients have been discharged. Sam has yet to join those discharged, but he is looking much better, his skin less pallid than before. Castiel’s been visiting him whenever he’s been able to, and this time he’s brought glad tidings of the awkward royal confessions and Naomi’s arrival, both of which have made Sam smile and laugh in turns.

This, though, has Sam anxious again. “You’re sure that Naomi didn’t say anything?”

“I’m sure,” Castiel says. “She was utterly focused on Michael and Lucifer, as she should be. But she was polite to Dean and me as well – shook our hands and thanked us for our contributions.”

Sam blinks. “She said that to *Dean*?”

Dean appears just then, leaning over Castiel’s shoulder with raised eyebrows. “Who said what to me? Hey, sorry I’m late.”

“We were just talking about Naomi,” Castiel says as Dean takes the stool next to him. “He was quite anxious about it, so I was sharing.”

“It was awesome,” Dean declares. “I don’t think she’s ever looked me right in the eye like that before. With, you know, respect and all that. Not that I’m letting it get to my head, of course – she’s just being friendly ‘cause I still have official custody of Michael.”

“Not just that,” Castiel says. “Both of you played important roles, and she’s smart enough to give that its due. Her methods may be... difficult, but she’s always believed in the agreement between our countries.”

“Which means more yakety-yak now that she’s here,” Dean says. “On the flipside, Sammy, you’ll be out of this place by the time there’s another proper Winchester get-together.”

“Yeah, about that!” Sam exclaims, so loudly and animatedly that Castiel starts in surprise. “I can’t believe you brought Cas to eat with Mom and Dad *without me*.”

“Not my fault you were a hostage at the time,” Dean deadpans.

Castiel inhales sharply at the quip, but Sam just rolls his eyes and drawls, “Oh please, like you didn’t want back-up when facing Mom and Dad.”

“Back-up?” Dean echoes. “You’d totally gang up on the newlyweds, Sasquatch.”

“Not true,” Sam says to Castiel. “I would be – I *will be* – very supportive.” He adds, more seriously, “I know it must have been at least a little be awkward.”

“Just a little, but the rest more than made up for it,” Castiel says. “If it makes you feel any better, I haven’t seen much of your parents since then, though I’ve been wanting to. Everyone’s been busy and it’s not as if I can just drop by their apartments whenever I happen to have a free hour.”

Dean nods sadly. “We haven’t had sex in ages, too.”

Sam gives his brother a look. “Really, Dean?”

“It’s a national tragedy,” Dean says. “Because we’re really good at it.”

“Right,” Sam says. “You know what’s a tragedy? Your face when I gave you Cas’ letter.”

Dean blinks. “Oh hey, did you know that Naomi said she’s taking Lucifer back ASAP to—” He snaps his mouth shut when Castiel puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Dean’s face was tragic?” Castiel asks.

“Utterly tragic,” Sam agrees, which has Dean hissing and flicking his fingers across his neck. “At first he was all happy to see me again, right, practically frantic in checking on me and making sure I was okay and refusing to even *listen* to my apologies, but then I took out the letter and told him it was from you and... I have to say, there was a second or so where I thought I might’ve broken him.”

“Oh,” Castiel says.

“Not in a bad way!” Sam says urgently. “He just got really quiet really suddenly, and then he got all gruff and wouldn’t even look at the letter, just stuffed it in his jacket and changed the subject. Of course then he snuck off as soon as I was busy talking to Bobby to read it all by himself.”

“Dean,” Castiel says quietly.

“What?” Dean crosses his arms. “*What?*”

Castiel squeezes Dean’s arm. “I love you.”

“Yeah, okay.” Dean coughs into his fist, seemingly unnerved by Sam’s wide grin. “God, Sam, we’re married, shut up.”

“You shut up,” Sam says cheerfully. “I’ve made plenty of mistakes, but at least one good thing came out of my running away.”

“Don’t give me that again,” Dean says with a scowl. “Not ‘one’ good thing – lots of good things, okay? You were at the right place to give us intel we needed on Lucifer and his plans. You helped get Grandpa Samuel and the others to face the music. Hell, you made sure I found Cas again.”

Sam sighs. “I’m not fishing for compliments, Dean.”

“I know you’re not.” Dean reaches over to push a hand into his brother’s hair, which has Sam ducking his head and making a noise of protest. “Just be cool, okay? Give it five, ten years, and then you can write a memoir about the whole thing. Bestseller, no question.”

“Unless I get arrested for treason,” Sam says.

“You can totally write in prison.” Dean laughs when Sam smacks his arm mildly. “Seriously, dude, we got it covered. Your job right now is just rest and get better.”

“I concur,” Castiel says. “And if it’s possible, perhaps you can one day show me around the Men of Letters facilities?”

Sam’s eyes widen, and he stretches a hand out to grasp Castiel’s. “Yes, that would be amazing.”

“You party animals you,” Dean says, to which Castiel laughs.

At this point, Castiel can be forgiven for wanting to be done with all the responsibilities thrust upon him in recent times. Rexford is back in control of its citizens; Ellen and Naomi

are holding Michael and Lucifer until trial; and as for Castiel's group of retainers, Anna has both the skill and interest in handling them, so all Castiel need do is obtain a promise of their safety from those in charge.

So it is that Castiel plays his part by getting an appointment with the ever-busy Naomi. He expects to have to wait at least a few days to see her, since her list of things-to-do must be tremendous, but to his surprise Rachel calls him up to her apartments a mere few hours after he put in his request.

"Do you have the entire floor?" Castiel asks when he gets there. It's not the penthouse but it's much higher than Castiel's been in Harvelle Tower thus far, and the view from the main sitting area is impressive.

"Most of it, I think," Rachel says. "Sorry about the mess. We're using other rooms as offices, but people have been coming and going through here a lot."

Castiel casts his eye around the room, and nods at the three staff members currently eating in the dining area. Naomi and her crew only been installed in these apartments for two days but they've amassed an impressive collection of paper-filled boxes, folders, newspapers and other sundries. All of Naomi's staff continue to be dressed impeccably, but that just makes the dissonance between their appearance and their lodgings more amusing. "Have you had enough sleep?"

"I had adequate sleep during the trip over," Rachel. "You look well."

"Thank you, so do you." Castiel reaches over to touch her elbow, but backs away when her eyes move self-consciously to the other staff in the room. "I'm really glad you're all right. I was nervous when I heard you were working around Raphael."

"There were a few close calls. But it was..." Rachel lowers her voice, "...exciting. And you're one to speak, sir, engaging in guerrilla warfare against Lucifer."

"I can take wild exaggeration from just about anyone but you," Castiel says, which has Rachel pressing a hand to her mouth to muffle her soft laughter. "Thank you, I appreciate that."

"I am sorry about your letters getting involved," Rachel says. "I only realized after the fact how you'd take it. Gathering the nobles behind a single cause was – well, it was a frightening juggling act, because we could never know who'd turn back to Raphael and at which point. Some of them were just more sympathetic to you than to Naomi, so having your point of view was critical."

"I understand," Castiel says truthfully. "I dislike it, but I understand why it was necessary. It's all right."

Rachel smiles ruefully. "Well, we should go. Naomi should be done soon, I think."

She takes him past the living area, down to where she mentioned the offices are. These rooms are more formal, and no doubt other important people come through this area of the

apartments when seeking an audience with Naomi. Naomi herself is in a simple, windowed study, dictating something to one of her secretaries, though she tells the secretary to take a break when she sees Castiel and Rachel.

“I should have a break as well,” Naomi says, moving to the side cabinet where a coffee pot has been set up. “Would you like some coffee, Castiel?”

“No, thank you.” Castiel sits in the offered chair, and nods a thank you at Rachel.

“Is Dean coming?” Naomi asks.

“No?” Castiel says. “Was he supposed to? He’s busy doing a sweep of the city to flush out any remaining royalists.”

“Ah, never mind then.” Naomi nods at Rachel and the secretary, who exit the room, leaving her and Castiel alone. “I thought that since the two of you are... as you are, that he’d be here with you.”

“Not all our agendas overlap,” Castiel says. “Well, I suppose he is related to the loyalty oath that some northerners made in the name of Winchester, but the intent was always directed to me.” He explains his reasons for coming here, as a spokesperson for those that made that oath, as well as those who didn’t but otherwise fear repercussions of their not going to Michael’s side during his summoning.

Naomi listens closely, only moving when she drinks her cup of coffee and leans against the desk. “As far as I’m concerned, everyone is free to stay here as per the Republic’s laws. Or they may return home, as the borders are wide open again. I honestly don’t care what went on during the time of crisis – many people were strong-armed into decisions they otherwise would not have made. As far as the Regency is concerned, everyone’s slate is wiped clean save for Michael and Lucifer’s significant followers, most of which are already in custody anyway. I will make an announcement to this effect. Thank you for reminding me.”

That is satisfactory, and people will see immediately the difference between the Regency and Michael’s old government. Still, Castiel smiles and says, “You don’t have the manpower to pursue every minor infraction.”

“That is true, but mostly the Regency needs as much support as it can get going into the first Parliament. If your power base is seen to approve of us, it will be most beneficial.”

Castiel is about to protest that he doesn’t have a power base, but that’s wrong, isn’t it? He does have one, albeit a strange, disunited one built on rebellious tracts and half-truths woven into stories. Castiel curbs his defensiveness and says instead, “Parliament? There hasn’t been a Parliament in... how many centuries.”

Naomi smiles. This should be terrifying, but Castiel concedes that she deserves to be satisfied with her accomplishments. By Michael’s reckoning, the agreement was worthless save for how it could be used as a foothold into the Republic, but Naomi turned that betrayal right round.

“You have an invitation, of course,” Naomi says. “And your own seat.”

“I’d rather not,” Castiel says.

“I knew you’d say that.” Naomi puts her cup down, her expression thoughtful as she takes in Castiel’s appearance. No doubt she’s cataloguing the many ways he’s changed from the last time they saw each other, though Naomi herself is exactly as she’s always been. Naomi is a force to be reckoned with, and oftentimes hateful in her callousness, but Castiel’s never feared her, not the way he’s feared Michael. As Naomi’s silent thoughtfulness drags from one second to another, Castiel wonders if he should change that opinion.

“I’m not a threat,” Castiel says.

Naomi inclines her head slightly. “It wouldn’t matter if you were, but I know you’re not. You are single-minded in your... simplicity. That is not an insult. I wish there were more like you in the world.”

“You didn’t agree to see me just to *see* me,” Castiel says. “You want something from me as well.”

“Ellen’s told me about the situation with your paperwork. I refer to your marriage.”

Castiel narrows his eyes. “Please don’t threaten my marriage.”

Naomi is about to speak, but stills. Her face isn’t unkind, but she’s clearly thinking carefully how to word herself – unless that, too, is a performance meant to make her sympathetic. “You know me well, I think. Or at least, you know me enough to be recognize that I don’t pursue things for the sake of my own pleasure.”

“I never wanted to be king,” Castiel says. “Whatever you’ve heard, it’s just talk. I haven’t done anything towards that goal.”

“Except,” Naomi says.

“I may have said certain things in public spaces, but that was for general morale, and I had nothing to do with the tracts that were distributed,” Castiel says. “As for the public confrontation – Lucifer chose to do that, and I only claimed him in response. And Dean – he only took Michael because he was following me.”

“I know all of this.” Naomi still hasn’t moved from her perch at the side of the desk, and Castiel hasn’t missed how this places a distinct height difference between them. “But you understand as well as anyone how these things take on a life of their own. People were already interested in you *before* all of this, and as these things accumulate, that interest evolves. Of course, you can’t actually become king, but people will expect you to do something. Chancellor, perhaps. Or Regent, over the crown prince.”

“No, thank you.”

“There will be an outcry.”

“I will make as many statements as necessary to show my support of you. I have no wish to challenge your reforms.”

Naomi nods. “I’m glad you said that. I would like you to return with me to the palace. Your presence will be crucial since we’re bringing Lucifer for his deposition. Dean may finish up his business here, but he will have to join us later with Michael.”

“Dean?” Castiel says.

“Then both of you must be present for the trials,” Naomi says. “I agree that you don’t need to attend full Parliament, but you and Dean must be there for the opening ceremony. The crown prince will be there as well, and following that I would like to share with you my plans on the tour of the kingdom to shore up support—”

“No,” Castiel says.

“I know this is a lot to take in.”

“*No*, Naomi. We don’t want anything to do with that.”

“You can’t half-ass it, Castiel,” Naomi says. “If you wish to prove that you support the new government, then you must follow my campaign precisely.”

“Says who?”

“Says you.” Naomi blinks and draws back, as if she didn’t mean to say that out loud.

“Perhaps we should put this off until I can see you and Dean together.”

“What do you mean, *I* did?”

Naomi sighs. “You signed the marriage contract. Ellen told me that you wished to renew your vows, and wanted me to look into the restoration of your dowry. So I assumed you wished to resume following the terms of the marriage.”

Castiel hasn’t thought of his marriage as a contract for so long. It must show on his face because Naomi reaches behind her, pulling out a familiar monster of a tome that he and Sam spent days poring over clause by clause. Sam may have read the full thing, but Dean didn’t, trusting his mother and others to know the details as they pertained to his then-role.

“You can’t possibly hold us to that,” Castiel says.

“It’s not a matter of if I *want* to hold you to the obligation,” Naomi replies calmly. “Either the contract is active, or it isn’t.”

“Force majeure,” Castiel says quickly. “There has literally been a war.”

“So you consider the contract void?”

Castiel isn’t angry, not really. Naomi may call *him* simple, but she is simple as well, in her own way. She is ruthless, but she always works within the letter of the law, hence her only

wresting power once she'd positioned herself as defending the sovereign state from Michael himself. Naomi's methods may be obscure, but her thinking is predictably righteous. In that vein, Castiel understands Naomi's insistence on obtaining the support of nobility, on bringing back Parliament, and on following all contracts to the letter.

"I will respect whatever you choose," Naomi says. "Ellen and myself, we're working towards a new agreement, and we're in the process of dismantling the old one. I was always going to discuss your marriage within the scope of that."

"Dean and I have moved past terms and clauses and obligations. They have no part in what we have now."

"I understand that," Naomi says gently. "But you got married in service of the crown, and of the Republic. That can never change."

"Of course it can change, many things can change, *I've* changed." Castiel swallows when Naomi says nothing, and merely holds his gaze patiently, waiting for him to move past his mild tantrum. "So that's it. Either we stay married and return to public puppetry in accordance with your requirements or..."

"The contract is very thorough," Naomi says.

"I've read it," Castiel snaps. "I know what the penalties are."

Naomi takes a deep breath. "The Regency has to be transparent. You must know that it's a fine line between allies and enemies, and there are many who'd push their way towards Michael's empty seat at the first sign of dishonesty by the new government. Your marriage may not be the greatest portion of the agreement, but it is the most prominent. Hell, you and Dean are the *face* of the agreement."

"It would do you good, wouldn't it?" Castiel says sharply. "If we just ended the contract and faded into obscurity."

"It would," Naomi admits. "But it would also free you of your obligations and I'll be honest – it would be in my best interests if we could control your contribution to the cause."

Castiel eyes the contract. "I would like to speak to my lawyer."

Naomi blinks. "You're not considering—"

"My lawyer." Castiel stands up. "My marriage doesn't belong to you, or to anyone else in the kingdom."

"It *does*, Castiel," Naomi says calmly. "You've forgotten that, but it does."

"We'll see about that," Castiel replies.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Sexual content: Handjobs.

“Obviously,” Castiel says in conclusion, “this means that I need to borrow money in order to engage a lawyer.”

He’s had a few hours to prepare this debriefing session, so he’s quite certain his explanation was clear and concise. His audience of one – i.e. Dean – listened the whole speech closely, and after a few seconds to process, makes a thoughtful little head-flick.

“What do you need a lawyer for?” Dean says.

“Because this is a contractual dispute,” Castiel says. “And we’ll need a lawyer’s advice on how to proceed.”

“Wait, wait, let me just...” Dean presses his fingers to the ridge of his nose. “You want to take Naomi to court. *Naomi*.”

“It doesn’t have to go to court,” Castiel says. “She probably wouldn’t want to be publicly seen in opposition of... well, *us*. But first we need a lawyer to review the contract and see how far it’s still applicable. I cannot speak for you, but I for one have no interest in fulfilling its requirements.”

“All right.” Dean nods. “Do you have a copy with – no. Would Ellen have a copy? Kevin might know.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea, I’ll check with Kevin. Rachel held my copy, but I have no clue where it is right now.” Castiel can recall the most memorable clauses clearly but it’s been months since he’s seen that document, so no doubt it’s worse than he remembers. There might even be a way to get Ellen on their side if they open a dispute, though that would take some clever maneuvering so not to put the agreement in jeopardy.

“Hey,” Dean says.

Castiel starts. “What?”

“You’re making that face.” Dean wraps a hand around the back of Castiel’s neck and squeezes gently. “Chill.”

“What face? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You made this face *all the time* at Joshua House,” Dean says. “Like there was a huge problem and you were convinced you were the only person in the whole wide world who could handle it. Look, the way you said it, it sounds like Naomi doesn’t *want* to enforce the contract, she’s just doing it because it’s expected of her. We can work with that.”

“That is a heartily optimistic view,” Castiel says flatly.

“Dude.” Dean’s smiling, and Castiel feels his face twist unhappily. “Cas, babe, this is – this is *tiny*. It’s just a piece of paper—”

“You’ll recall it’s more substantial than *a piece*.”

“—and we’ve waded through tougher shit than that. I mean *hello*, Michael? Lucifer? Everyone else not listening to us? You being so far away I thought I’d never...” Dean clears his throat and gently puts his hands on Castiel’s shoulders. The grounding gesture reminds Castiel to take a deep breath. “Cas, we got a team now. We can handle this.”

He’s right. Even without Dean saying it out loud, Castiel would know that what he’s saying is true. Castiel isn’t the same person now as he was when he signed the contract, and it’s foolish to think that he will accept its terms the way he once did. And it isn’t just him who’s been altered so – the same goes for Dean, their families. Hell, even their two nations are standing in such different places in relation to each other today.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel says. “You’re right, we can figure this out.”

Dean drops a kiss on Castiel’s nose. “There we go. You wanna get Anna in on this?”

“Yes, good idea,” Castiel says. “And your parents, I think, they should be aware.”

Dean sighs. “Yeah, they should. Okay, you get the contract. I’m gonna go talk to some people.”

While it isn’t difficult to get a copy of the contract from Kevin, the fact that Castiel does it at all means that word will travel back to Ellen soon, if she isn’t aware already of Naomi’s interest in reviving the marriage terms. Castiel brings up this concern to Dean later in the evening, when they meet again for a fuller conference with the rest of the family.

“We can’t be sure what angle Ellen’s gonna take,” Dean says. “I say we let her bring it up with us first.”

“Wouldn’t that leave it wide open for her to team up with Naomi against us?” Castiel asks. “They made the first agreement together, after all.”

“Ellen won’t antagonize you outright that way,” Mary says. “She owes you a great deal, what with settling Michael and Lucifer.”

Sam clears his throat. “Even if Ellen doesn’t want to pursue the terms, it might not slow Naomi down. As far as I understand it, Naomi *is* the law now. Well, the law as far as is relevant to the crown.”

It’s early evening, and they’re in Mary and John’s temporary apartments at Speaker. Dean and Castiel are sharing a settee opposite Mary and John, who are on the couch with Sam flanking them as he’s perched on the couch’s armrest. Anna rounds up the evening’s council in her own chair, and she’s currently flipping through the contract copy in her lap.

“Naomi sent one of her secretaries to me today,” Anna says. “He gave me the circular, the one where Naomi’s government has agreed to full pardons of all northerners, like she told Castiel she would. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but when he gave it to me, he made a point of saying that Naomi was ‘*glad*’ that she and Castiel could be so helpful to each other.”

“Is that a threat?” Dean asks.

“A subtle one,” Castiel says. “The kinds that she likes.”

“I don’t mean to be a party pooper,” Sam says, “but does anyone think any lawyer would want to go up against *Naomi*? I mean, it’ll have to be someone from the continent, for sure, and to take on the Regency is... well, it could be a career killer.”

“Or a career boost,” John says. “Don’t underestimate how useful publicity can be.”

Sam makes a face. “I – I know that.”

“What would you have us do?” Castiel says. “This isn’t something we have weeks to deliberate on. Naomi will want to return to the kingdom soon with Michael in custody, which means that *I* will have to return with her, and any chance we have at cutting this off at the knees will be gone. I doubt she’s even going to wait for our agreement – she will simply take a lack of action as acquiescence, and we’ll be back in the thick of it.”

Dean clears his throat, licks his lips, and slowly meets Castiel’s gaze. “Is it that bad?”

“What?” Castiel says.

“I’ve just been thinking about it.” Dean scratches the back of his neck. “I mean, correct me if I’m wrong, but the contract was really just about us being married, right? It has stuff like... about property and making sure I pay a shitload of money if I get caught cheating on you. Sure, there’s some stuff about making public appearances and whatever, but we’re kinda already doing that, aren’t we?”

“The requirements of the contract are more than just occasionally having lunch where people can see,” Castiel says. “It’s tours, speeches, photo ops, pageantry participation... Dean, they have literally calculated the number of hours per week that we are obligated to *give* them to

use as they see fit. There are clauses about where to live, *how* to live. There's even a whole sub-section about what we *must* do to obtain approval to have children."

"And I was okay with all of that when I signed it," Dean says.

Castiel inhales sharply.

"Cas," Dean says quickly, "I'm not saying all of that isn't creepy. It is! It's creepy and invasive. But you asked me a few days ago how I'd feel if you became king, and this is... well, this is kinda like that, isn't it? I'm okay with all of it, everything single thing, as long as I get to be with you."

Anna has stopped flipping through the contract, and is fixing them both with a calm, unreadable expression. Mary and John are watching them, too, though Sam is kind of grimacing awkwardly and studying his hands instead.

"That is not acceptable to me," Castiel says at last.

Dean sighs loudly. "Okay, so we need to review our options."

"Lawyer, I said," Castiel says.

"I can ask around," John says.

"I'll do that, too," Sam adds with a nod. "The Men of Letters might have some recommendations."

There's more discussion after that, of other things they can do and other angles to take in pursuing their goals. Castiel is grateful that the others are taking this seriously, especially when Naomi's made no overtures of reclaiming him and Dean just yet. There's only been the one conversation, and a little voice in Castiel's head whispers that perhaps he's overreacting again – only to be silenced by another little voice that responds that every time Castiel's overreacted, there was *definitely* something worth overreacting about.

It is a fact that Castiel knows Naomi. So does Anna, though Anna left court before Naomi fully ascended to power. If the marriage is of value to Naomi then she will pursue it with all the resources she has, come hell or high water. The only way to get around it is to make such a pursuit not worth her while. This clan – Castiel, his husband, his sister, his in-laws – might indeed have enough ruckus in them to make *anything* Naomi does not worth her while.

It takes two days before the recommended lawyer (a friend of a Man of Letters, via Sam and approved by Mary and John) can arrive.

A great deal can happen in two days, and in their case includes Castiel's receiving a suggestive letter from Naomi's office that contains her schedule for the next few weeks. A tentative departure date for the kingdom is smack dab in the middle of that schedule, and Naomi's secretary politely asks Castiel if he would like arrangements to be made for other persons he'd like to travel with them, such as oh, Anna? As Castiel was with his retinue at the time the question was presented, he merely nodded at Hannah and Daniel, who helpfully and pointedly escorted the secretary out of the premises.

Dean is luckier, for he successfully evades various attempts by Naomi's people to bring him in for a meeting. Naomi may be determined, but this is Dean's home ground, and Dean is resourceful.

Two days of evasion also mean two days of Castiel's thoughts churning themselves round and round, and often going back to Dean's simple declaration of, "*I was okay with all of that when I signed it.*"

It's not that Dean's admission was surprising, because it wasn't. That is what Dean does for his loved ones, as evidenced repeatedly in the relatively short time that Castiel's known him. Yet while such a declaration was fine when they'd only been talking in hypotheticals of Castiel's becoming king, now that the contract's come back into play, it's... not as flattering as it once was.

Castiel may appreciate the sentiment, but he doesn't actually want that from Dean. He doesn't need Dean to prove his feelings *that* way, not when there are so many other more interesting ways that Dean has and can use to show his affections. Castiel doesn't like that Dean could even consider obeying the contract at all.

Sure, he and Dean have an unusual marriage, but they've made something new out of it. They've reformed it into new shape, defined it by new parameters. For all the awfulness that is Michael's arrogance, Lucifer's seduction, and the Council's duplicity, one thing Castiel cannot regret out of the whole business is where his and Dean's relationship ended up. If none of that happened, would they have been able to reach each other the way they have now? It's terrifying to think of.

The contract harkens back to that time, to what they used to be. It's not merely annoying, it's *offensive*.

So it is that Castiel spends a great deal of time thinking about the contract, about Dean's worrying agreeableness, about the things that people are willing to do for the sake of love.

It's at that point that the idea occurs to Castiel. It's a small idea, conjured and set aside as casually as thousands of other thoughts that flit through a person's brain throughout the day. But there it stays, until the lawyer arrives.

The lawyer in question is also a priestess, and unaffiliated with any of the main noble Houses of the Republic, hence Mary and John's approval of her. Her arrival means it's time for another family conference, this one more secret than the one preceding it. Anna suggests that they meet in the grand temple – the place where Dean and Castiel were married, coincidentally – so they each travel there individually or in pairs under the cover of night.

It's all very cloak and dagger, but the lawyer, Calliope, is unfazed.

"It comes with the territory," she says, when Castiel shakes her hand and apologizes for all the fuss. "Is everyone here? Hello, yes, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Mary and John are the last to arrive, after which Anna thanks the monks for their help and secures the room. This small store room in the temple's basement reminds Castiel so much of that windowless room he was dragged into the night Sam ran away. It's an appropriate memory to recall, since tonight's meeting is also a conspiracy regarding Castiel's marriage.

"Mary, John," Calliope says, shaking their hands in turn.

"Glad you could make it so quickly," John says.

"It's not a problem." Calliope casts her gaze around the room. "The parents, the grooms, the two siblings. Is this everyone? Good. First of all, are there any new updates on the situation that we should know about?"

Mary raises a hand. "I met Ellen today. Not official, just... you know, chatting. She says she can't officially comment on the contract, because she needs to get Council approval before declaring one way or another. Off the record, she has no interest in pursuing the terms, and would happy to just let the whole thing slide."

Calliope nods. "So it's just Madam Naomi that concerns us?"

"It appears to be so, yes," Mary says.

"All right." Calliope takes the chair at the head of the plastic table that is their discussion table, and sets down her copy of the contract, which now has stickers peeking out from between the pages. "There's nothing in here that says that the Republic has to approve of the kingdom's right to enforce it, so the crown can work independently of whatever the Council decides."

Castiel scowls. "So even if Ellen chooses to default on behalf of the Republic, the contract is valid?"

"Yes," Calliope says. "This contract is highly biased against yourself and Dean, though that's typical of such dealings. It's direct, practical and very thorough. Teams of lawyers combed over this for months, and it shows."

Dean sighs. "Are you saying there's no wiggle room? Nothing to keep Naomi out of our business?"

"It's not Naomi specifically that concerns me," Calliope says. "It's His Royal Majesty King Michael's signature on the document, not hers. Even if Naomi wanted to set you free of your obligations, anyone within the royal government can pursue it instead."

"Wait," Anna says, sitting up. "Michael's not the king anymore. Would that make it invalid?"

"No," Calliope says. "He signed on behalf of the crown, and the crown exists."

“So it’s stuck,” Anna says. “Either Naomi’ll enforce it, or someone else will.”

“And they will,” Castiel says. “If only to keep us in line and not threaten the Regency in any way.”

Calliope clears her throat. “The termination clauses are of interest, though. If you can prove that either government has not fulfilled their obligations towards *you*, you might have a case to terminate.”

“We’re not looking to terminate,” Dean says.

Calliope frowns. “I thought that was the whole purpose of this? You wished to be free of the contract?”

“Not *terminate*,” Dean says. “We want to stay married, we just don’t want all the other things.”

“They’re one and the same,” Calliope says.

There it is. That’s the idea. Castiel takes a deep breath.

“Perhaps we should consider that,” Castiel says.

Dean swings his head around and narrows his eyes at Castiel. “Consider what?”

“Full termination,” Castiel says. “It’ll solve everything.”

“Nope,” Dean says. “Not an option.”

“Dean—”

“Why won’t you let me do this?” Dean says in exasperation. “I’m all for making a stand, but this is – *God*, Cas, this ain’t even a battle. I checked the contract, okay, we can negotiate the terms after two years. We can get it loosened up, and we’ll be better prepared for it by then.”

“I don’t want to,” Castiel says. “I believe that a full termination now would be more beneficial than negotiations we can’t predict two years from now.”

“You know that’s crazy, right?” Dean says. “If we get divorced, I can’t protect you anymore. We’ll be – there’ll be nothing keeping us together legally, or even keeping you *here*. Naomi can just take you back and do whatever the fuck she wants with you.”

“You’ll just have to work harder to protect me, then,” Castiel says. “And I’ll have to trust that you can.”

Dean’s mouth is a thin, angry line. “No. Naomi would be prepared for that anyway.”

“I don’t think so,” Castiel says. “She knows it would destroy all the goodwill we’ve amassed. From her point of view, our only value – not just to her, but to everyone who’s ever been

invested in us – is in what we are *together*. It would be a betrayal of what we're supposed to be representing.”

Mary speaks up just then, her voice gentle: “It won’t be permanent, Dean.”

“What the *hell*, Mom,” Dean snaps.

“Whoa Dean,” Sam says in surprise.

Calliope chimes up helpfully, “You can be married again after two years. It’s mentioned in clause 11.4 under termination. You will have to pay a... well, a near-crippling fine and return all dowries, among other penalties, but it is possible.”

“Oh, two years, is that it?” Dean says sarcastically. “Wow, amazing.”

“I’m not saying that I want this,” Castiel says. “Just thinking about being untethered to you is frightening, when that tether has been vital to my well-being these past months.”

“Then how can you even think about it?” Dean demands.

“I’m tired of *lying*, Dean,” Castiel says. “I don’t want to pretend anymore, I don’t want to be *obedient*. I love you, and I don’t mind the world knowing that I love you, but I want it to know how I *really* love you. Just thinking about returning to the kingdom and having to sell that awful fiction again about how we supposedly met, how we supposedly wanted to get married the way we did. What new fictions will Naomi give us next, to tell the tale of our besting Michael and Lucifer?”

“*That?*” Dean says in disbelief. “That’s what’s bugging you?”

“It’s symptomatic of a whole,” Castiel says angrily. “I have known one kind of life, and then this happened, then *you* happened, and I found something different. One where I could be master of myself in ways I never was before. I don’t want to go back to... to what it was before. You say we can negotiate in two years, but I can tell you that two years is enough time to get used to the kingdom’s cages. I got out, and I would like to stay out, just as I would like any children we might have to stay out.”

Castiel may be vibrating a little, but he thinks he’s entitled.

Dean seems to be shaking as well. Under different circumstances, Castiel would be deeply moved by Dean’s dedication, but their marriage has always been about more than just them. Castiel even thought that Dean understood that, after their first rough patch in Joshua House, but so much time has passed since then, and it’s understandable that Dean would have forgotten.

Or perhaps Dean didn’t forget; he’d merely accepted. Dean *would* subsume all the negative into himself for the sake of the cause. Dean is stubborn as hell but his pick of battles is different from Castiel’s, and in there lies the disagreement between them.

“We’re halfway divorced anyway,” Castiel says quietly.

Dean stands up sharply, chair screeching in protest as it's shoved back. Castiel's heart thunders in his chest as Dean storms out of the room, and then there are five sets of eyes on Castiel with various levels of sympathy.

"I should..." Castiel stands up awkwardly. "Uh, perhaps you can discuss our options. I'll be right back."

"All right," Anna says gently.

Dean hasn't gone far. He's just outside the room, at the end of the short hallway and sitting on the bottom-most stairs. He doesn't react when Castiel approaches, though his body language exudes pointed unfriendliness.

"I'm sorry for upsetting you," Castiel says. Dean's eyes twitch a little, but they stay focused at the middle distance, somewhere past Castiel's knees. "May I join you?"

Dean doesn't say no, but Castiel doesn't think he should sit next to him just yet. Castiel leans against the wall and takes in the basement setting – the noticeboard just opposite with its flyers and newspaper clippings, the broom set against the wall, the movement visible through the crack under the door that leads back to the meeting room. It's all very mundane and quiet, and should be calming, except it isn't.

"You have dreams for us," Castiel says at last. "You want a small, private house, with a little garden for me and a garage for you. You want... video tapes, and a library, and a view. These are things that are unlikely to come to pass if we return to the roles Naomi wants us to resume."

"So?" Dean says. "They're just dreams."

"But I *want* that," Castiel says, pained. "I want that very much."

Dean exhales loudly and presses his hands to his face. He mutters something under his breath but Castiel can't catch any of it aside from a faint "such a moron".

"I'm sorry if—" Castiel takes a shaky breath, "—I'm sorry if it sounded like I love you less, but I promise that's—"

"Jesus, Cas, come here," Dean says hoarsely. "Come here."

Castiel joins him on the stairs, and Dean immediately winds an arm around him, pulling him close. Castiel sighs at the touch and leans in, eyes drifting shut when Dean guides him to rest his head on Dean's shoulder.

"I'm a fucking idiot," Dean says. His hand, resting on the back of Castiel's head, starts stroking Castiel's hair gently. "Of course you don't want to be controlled anymore. *Of course* you don't. And here I am talking about me me me like some goddamned—"

"Dean—"

“—like I’m as bad as all those fuckers who’s been telling you what to do your whole fucking life.”

“You are not,” Castiel insists. “And you’re not only thinking about yourself, you’re thinking about *us*. I do understand, Dean. Our marriage is important to you, so of course you would get upset at the suggestion of our breaking it. But the way I see it, this wouldn’t be *ending* it, it’ll just be remaking it.”

“I hear that, but...” Dean sighs.

“Tell me,” Castiel says. “Please.”

Dean shifts his tattoo arm, setting it to rest on his lap. At a gesture of his fingers, Castiel reaches over to unbutton Dean’s cuff and slide the sleeve up, revealing the dark swirls of ink, broken in places by clear skin.

“This is ours,” Dean says. “Sure it’s ugly and scratched and maybe not even legal anymore, but it’s *ours*. Our story is in here, warts and all. You wanna erase that?”

The admission is startling, as is Dean’s choice of words. Castiel has to take a moment to compose himself before replying, “There’s no erasing what we’ve been through. Not when it’s in every moment I think of you, in everything we are to each other. This binding is just one physical representation of it.”

“I *know*,” Dean says, sounding annoyed – though more at himself than at Castiel. “But it’s like... There were times when this *physical representation* was all I had to keep me going, and it’s like, I don’t know, if we erase it, then you’re gonna go away and forget about me.”

Castiel inhales sharply. “I could never *forget* you. Dean, my regard for you isn’t as simple as ink on skin.”

“I know that *here*,” Dean says, knocking his knuckles against the side of his head. “But here...” He brushes those same knuckles over his heart. “I’m an idiot, I know.”

“No, not stupid,” Castiel says. “It’s a human fear, and I didn’t mean to belittle your feelings.”

“I mean, I *know* that if we renew our tats the missing bits are gonna get filled in anyway,” Dean says, “but the original ink will still be in there, you know? It’ll still have most of the letters that were there from the very beginning. I just get attached to things I see, I guess.”

“I like that about you,” Castiel says. “You imbue meaning in things by sheer force of will.”

They fall silent for a while, though Castiel can tell that Dean is thinking deeply. Castiel may feel it’s necessary to break their binding, but he doesn’t like having to push Dean towards it at all. For a second Castiel contemplates letting it go – perhaps there is some other way to deal with the contract, some loophole that they haven’t found yet that would set them free from their obligations. But then he remembers that this is Naomi, verifiable queen of loopholes, and greater people than Castiel have been bested by her over less.

Eventually Dean says, “I guess it would be nice if Sam could be there when we get married again. And I get to make vows that I actually mean.”

Castiel swallows. “Anna can give me away, too.”

“That would definitely be cool.”

“We’ll have full control over the event, too,” Castiel adds. “So no interviews, no cameras aside from the ones we want. Our own guest list. And food! You weren’t impressed by the food last time, I recall.”

“I liked the suit, though. Snazzy.”

“It was a very nice suit.” Castiel can’t see Dean’s face from his angle, but he knows he’s smiling. “I think Rachel should be able to get us in touch with the tailor they used.”

“And no one can say we don’t mean it this time,” Dean says. “Two years is kinda... but hey, I’ll get to propose this time.”

“Why do you get to propose?” Castiel asks. “Perhaps I would like to propose.”

“Not if I get there first.”

“We’ll see.”

“You know, you um...” Dean pauses, scratching his nose. “Like you said, I’ve been yammering on about a house and whatever, but you haven’t said anything about what you want.”

“What I want?” Castiel says in surprise. “I’m quite fond of the house idea, and I did mention books.”

“Other than that,” Dean says. “What else?”

Castiel thinks. The picture he’s been forming in his head is guided loosely by what he’s seen in his travels and read about in books, but aside from the house that Castiel can almost smell if he concentrates hard enough, he hasn’t thought much of other additions. He’d be content with the library and the garden, and anything Dean would want to add would of course be of interest, but what else?

“I’d like to teach again,” Castiel says. “Somehow.”

“You wanna head back to your university?”

“I doubt the position’s still available,” Castiel says wryly. “No doubt all my students have been handed over into less controversial hands. Oh, I would like to meet the Men of Letters! And... crafting. Yes, I’d like to get into alchemy crafting, that’s always been... I’ve always been interested in that but never had the chance to indulge myself in the science of it.”

Dean laughs. “You sound surprised.”

“I guess I am?” Castiel says. “I’d never let myself really think about that because it’s not really something you could make a career of in the isles.”

“You gotta tell me all about it,” Dean says. “Then we can figure something out.”

“Really?” Castiel flushes and ducks his head at how childish he must sound. “Sorry, I’m—”

“It’s fucking annoying how adorable you are,” Dean groans. “What the hell, man. And now I’m stuck – we just *have* to terminate the contract so I can get you all the crafting shit you want. Thanks a lot, Cas.” Castiel recognizes Dean’s roundabout bluster for what it is, but he’s still surprised by the way Dean kisses him solidly on his cheek.

“I am honored to be your chosen, Dean Winchester,” Castiel says. “Thank *you*.”

Dean shakes his head. “Okay, we should head back in. There’s still work to do.”

Returning to the room isn’t as awkward as Castiel thought it would be. Mary and John may make Castiel nervous, but Anna’s sympathetic smile is enough to calm him, as is the way Sam has a notepad in front of him and has apparently been taking minutes on the discussion they’ve been having.

“I’m in,” Dean says. “On the termination shtick.”

Sam looks up worriedly from his writing. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” Dean drops into his chair. “It makes sense. Don’t give me that look, I know you want to be my best man when me and Cas get hitched again.”

Sam breaks into a grin. “Do I get to toast you?”

“Sure,” Dean says.

“Deal,” Sam says.

“I think we should review the termination clauses first,” Calliope says. “To be sure that it is what you want.”

They do, and it is. Though once that’s settled, there’s the question of *how*. While Naomi may not be expecting them to break the binding, as soon as she catches wind of it (which she will) she might do everything in her power to stop it. Castiel is quite certain of this, and Anna agrees as well.

“You need a decoy plan,” Anna says. “If she thinks you’re up to something else, she won’t see this coming.”

“She’s against Cas making a power grab, right?” Dean says. “There’s that.”

“What,” Castiel says with a laugh, “am I the sort of person who’d pursue the kingship solely to protect my marriage?”

“It’s logical,” Sam says. “You become king, then no one’s the boss of you. Perfect independence.”

“That’s a poor reason to become king,” Castiel says.

Dean pouts. “I’m not worth it?” He seems to remember his parents are in the room and sits up straight. “Joke. I do that sometimes.”

“You’re worth many things,” Castiel says anyway.

“Love is as good a reason as any to pursue power,” Mary says. “Many have done more for less.”

“Love *and* independence,” Anna says.

Calliope clears her throat. “Should I be here for this?”

“Yes, we need an analysis of the penalties for private termination,” Castiel says. “We have to be prepared for any eventually. It was a circus when we married, and it might just as easily become a circus when we divorce.”

“You have to leave the city,” John says.

“Oh my God, that’s right,” Sam says. “Not just to get away from Naomi, but from Ellen, too. I mean, Ellen might be sympathetic, but if you stay here she might get blamed for this and I hate to say it, it could put the agreement in jeopardy. Which would be the opposite of the kind of attention you need right now.”

Anna inhales sharply. “Okay, *idea*.”

There is a sense of finality in the actions they take over the following days. Castiel thought that his act of rebellion against Michael was the biggest Point of No Return he would ever face in his life, yet this feels greater than that. It isn’t merely an act of ending their marriage; it is the closing of a journey that began the day that Naomi walked into Castiel’s university, so there’s a sense of poetry in Naomi’s being the focal point here again.

It isn’t as simple as getting a cleric to break the binding, either. They already have their cleric, anyway – Calliope has the qualifications as priestess to handle the ritual – but the surrounding process has to be by the book and documented according to all the niceties of the law, so to be free of loopholes Naomi or anyone else may use afterward.

Basically, they need to cover their asses as thoroughly as possible before they even start the ritual itself. Luckily, they have some experience with that now.

“I want you to take no unnecessary risks,” Castiel tells Hannah. She, and those standing behind her, nod so solemnly that Castiel has to add, “Please. I won’t be able to do my part if I’m worrying about all of you.”

“We’re glad to do this, sir,” Esper insists.

“Junior Madam Harvelle has been very helpful as well,” Hannah says. “We are aware of the places we can take sanctuary if Naomi decides to move against us.”

Tonight Castiel’s speaking with what’s left of his retainers in what has become their headquarters in the Harvelle Tower. This last meeting is a goodbye between them, for Hannah and her flock have to carry on by themselves from this point on.

“The protests have been excellent,” Castiel says. “Your placards are very eye-catching, Adina.”

Adina beams. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’ve eluded Naomi and her people for quite a few days now,” Castiel says. “As long as you keep up the illusion that I’m still moving amongst you, they won’t notice we’re gone. You have all the written communications?”

“Yes,” Hannah says, understandably amused since they’d just reviewed the final checklist only a few minutes ago. “All the letters, the photos – they’re all accounted for, and we will be prudent where to use them. We’ve been doing this kind of work before we even came to you, Castiel. Trust us.”

“I do,” Castiel says. “I’m honored, and I wish I could do more for the trust you have given in me. I’m sorry that I can’t explain everything, but I promise that it’ll all be made clear soon.”

Hannah makes face. “You’ve said that. Look, you’ve done so much for us already, so I for one am happy to do this for you. The same goes for the rest of us.”

“I know, but...” Castiel shakes his head. “I feel selfish.”

“So would you consider pursuing the kingship for real then, sir?” Esper says. “I’m sure we could get a full movement going.”

“Not that selfish,” Castiel says, which gets a few laughs. “A half-movement will be sufficient.”

Esper nods amiably. “Just checking, sir. Please send our regards to your husband as well.”

“Yes,” Hannah says. “Good luck to you both. Don’t worry if you can’t make contact with us when you’re done.”

“I’ll try,” Castiel says warmly.

A hug seems appropriate at this point, but there are almost a dozen people in the room and Castiel is anxious at the prospect of having to hug *all* of them. Hannah seems to read this off

his face and offers her hand, which he shakes gratefully.

After that, it's a matter of letting one of Naomi's party briefly see him one last time, and then make his way to the agreed meeting point. The first part is easy – a slow walk across the Square should suffice – and then Castiel's slipping through the crowd, behind buildings and through walkways in a seemingly random route until he finds the waiting spot behind a closed café.

There's a dark blue SUV there, plus two gentlemen leaning against said vehicle. One of said gentlemen is Victor, who says, "There you are," while the other is Castiel's husband, who says, "*Told* you."

"I'm sorry, I just had to double-check," Castiel says. "And... triple-check. I worry."

"No sweat," Dean says, opening the passenger door. "We're flexible."

"I assume you were more efficient than myself," Castiel says as he enters the car. "Everything's settled?"

"Yep." Dean closes Castiel's door and walks around the car to the driver's side. The SUV is not Dean's ideal choice, but taking the Impala is out of the question, so she shall have to remain in Victor's custody until such time as more reunions can be made. "Sam, Mom and Dad are still working on the letters to Ellen, but they should be ready by the time they join us."

"Good." Castiel takes a deep breath. "Good."

They leave the city under the cover of darkness, their borrowed SUV slipping easily into the lines of other vehicles heading out into the highways. There will be a great deal of movement all across the continent for a while yet, and in this instant it is to their advantage. Dean, however, doesn't fully relax until they're well out of the city limits, and then he glances over at Castiel with a smile.

"We're on our way," Dean says. "And I forgot my fucking cassette tapes."

"You can sing," Castiel says. "I like that."

Dean makes a face, but Castiel can tell he's pleased at the comment. "Trust me, after the first half hour you're gonna be beggin' for mercy."

"There is the radio." Castiel reaches for the console and pokes at various knobs curiously. Faint music fills the car, and Dean makes another unimpressed face.

"We have to road trip for real," Dean says. "Properly, a few whole weeks set aside for us and some maps, no plans, just the open road."

"We could do that for our second honeymoon," Castiel suggests.

"No way," Dean scoffs. "That's in two years, I'm not waiting that long."

It isn't the first time that Dean's mentioned the two-year grace period derogatorily, and as in the previous instances, Castiel finds himself falling silent, guilt pinching his ribs at what he's asked of Dean. Castiel may believe that the breaking is necessary, and there is satisfaction in throwing those obligations away, but there is no getting around the cost in taking such steps.

"Hey, I didn't mean to..." Dean trails off. "I'm okay with doing this. I *am*."

"You're not," Castiel says. "You accept it, but you're not okay with it. There's a difference."

"Cas, hey, listen to me." Dean reaches over to squeeze his arm. "I've been thinking about this, and besides the fact that you're right that it would be awesome for everyone if we're out from under the Naomi's thumb, it's actually not that different from what I was wanting to do before. I mean, the part where I was okay with following the contract's say so – that's kinda fucked up as well, isn't it? Both are a kind of sacrifice, right? And we're just choosing the one that's gonna be better for us in the long term. So it's... I'm okay with this, really. Dude, I thought we were gonna do the whole thing where we trust each other on shit like this."

"Yes, that's right," Castiel says. "You're right."

"I'm proud of you, you know," Dean says. "Making a stand like this? Before, you were always doing stuff because you believed it was the right thing to for *everyone's* sake – Michael and Lucifer didn't stand a chance, really. But *this* is for you, for us. I don't know about you, but I think we're worth it."

"We are," Castiel says, surprised by how much he believes that now. It has him grateful all over again how this plan would not be possible if they didn't have the help they do. More than once Castiel worried of the consequences that will follow them, but over these past days Dean, Anna, and Sam all insisted on the worth of what they're doing. John even managed to pull Castiel aside at one point and thank him, for this way the Winchesters will have a chance for a clean break, and return to the edge of relevance where the rest of the noble Houses are concerned.

It would be nice to have some positive collateral effect for a change.

It's a long journey, though not as long as the days-long caravan from Rexford. Dean's insistent on maximizing their driving time, so they switch immediately when the other is tired, and don't make any stops save the absolutely necessary ones for gas. Night leads into day quickly, though mostly because Castiel uses his passenger time to catch up on all the sleep he's been missing.

Castiel jolts awake with a hand on his shoulder. "Hmm?"

“Hey,” Dean says. “Thought you might wanna be awake for this.”

Castiel sits up, grunts at the crick in his neck, and slowly takes in their surroundings. For a while there were only the long highways for a view, and considering that Castiel saw plenty of that on the way to St. Lebanon, it hadn’t been of interest to him going in the opposite direction. But now there’s patches of small buildings nestled between the trees, with the occasional lowland crop fields attached.

“I would take you through town, but this is the back way,” Dean says apologetically. “Don’t want to be seen, right?”

“That’s all right.” Castiel’s still groggy, so he can be forgiven for only belatedly noticing how nervous Dean is. His fingers are twitchy on the steering while, his knee is jiggling on the seat. Castiel squints out of the window and asks, “Where’s the – that place you mentioned, where you and Sam like to park the Impala to stargaze?”

“Oh, that’s over that way.” Dean points. “Won’t be able to see it from here, but I’ll take you there, don’t worry. Okay, *here’s* what’s worth waking up for.”

At first there’s just an old-fashioned wall partially visible through the trees, but then they turn the corner and it’s clear that the wall is part of a long street, fields on one side and a handful of large houses on the other. Dean hasn’t talked about the history of the place, but Castiel would venture this used to be a single estate, likely built for the family of a single House, but down the line was split up for separate owners, new walls set between the buildings as they were sold off.

“Don’t pay any attention to the others,” Dean says. “You wanna keep your eyes on the prize.”

“I promise to pay no attention to any of the others.” Castiel waits until the Winchester seat – and Dean’s childhood home – comes into view, with its pale blue walls and large windows, one of which has beige curtains and thus belongs to Dean’s room. Dean’s numerous tales of the place make the building instantly recognizable, and Castiel can’t help but smile when he sees the garden (Mary’s pride and joy) and the swing on the porch (which John and Dean made when Sam was a baby).

“Just, um.” Dean draws up to the gate and sets the car on idle. “Wait a sec.”

Just like how Castiel is charmed by the house, he is charmed by the way Dean jogs out to open the gate. Dean’s just so *flustered*, and continues to be flustered even when he drives the car into the compound, and then nearly trips on his own feet as they walk to the entrance.

“So it’s um.” Dean clears his throat and unlocks the door. “There’s a lady that comes by to clean every few days, but we’ve all been away for a while, so it’s...”

“Dean,” Castiel says.

“Yeah, okay.” He opens the door, and then they’re inside the Winchester home.

There is so much to take in – the foyer with the framed photos on the wall, the living area with its cheerful furniture and monster of an entertainment system, then further in where the edge of the dining area is just visible. Castiel drifts in slowly to take in the details, and is delighted when he sees something that slips instantly into one of Dean's many stories.

It's a modest house, and perfectly fitting with what Castiel's learned of Dean and his family. It's easy to envision young Dean and Sam running through these rooms with enthusiasm while Mary and John watch over them. It's a homely place, just like Anna's cottage was homely, but built for a family. It's a family that Castiel's a part of now, too, and the novelty of that has yet to wear off.

"Okay, um," Dean says, voice way too loud. "Wanna see my room?"

Castiel turns to face Dean. "Yes, that would be nice."

Dean's room is on the first floor, and it's quite close to what Castiel has been picturing, right down to the box of records on the floor, model cars on the shelves and the retro-style posters on the wall. Dean hasn't been back here for a while but the room seems bursting at the seams with his things anyway, and Castiel has the excited, feverish thought that decorating their future home will be quite the adventure.

"This is very nice, Dean," Castiel says. "Is the wallpaper your choice?"

"No, actually, that's – Mom and Dad picked the green, but it's nice." Dean turns away to the closet, picking through the clothes there. "You can wear some of my things, if you want?"

"I don't mind my limited wardrobe, but that would be nice, too." Castiel sits on the edge of the queen-sized bed and takes in his fill of the view, marveling that a place is able to contain so much of Dean's personality. When Castiel turns back to his host, Dean's holding a small pile of shirts and, after blinking rapidly, hands one over. Castiel takes the shirt and glances down at himself, checking that he hasn't spontaneously undressed without realizing. He *hasn't*, but Dean's still just... watching him.

Castiel carefully peels off the shirt he's currently wearing, and pulls on the one Dean gave him. It's an old shirt, soft and well-worn, with a partially-faded print of a prism on the front. Castiel adjusts the hem, and then looks up at Dean expectantly.

"Okay." Dean coughs, frowns, and puts his hands on his hips. "So. Do you want to fool around?"

Castiel nods. "All right."

"I mean right now."

"I'm fine with that." After a beat Castiel adds, "Is this a thing with you? Me in your room, me wearing your clothes?"

"Don't judge me," Dean says.

Castiel cocks his head. "Would you like me to put on some of your underwear, too?"

Dean makes a choked noise. “Yes. Right, wait there, I...” He finds a pair of boxers from one of the drawers, and funnily enough turns around while Castiel puts them on.

These, too, are worn and comfortable, and Castiel briefly contemplates the merit of relying entirely on Dean’s wardrobe for the foreseeable future. Obviously Dean is more skilled in picking and maintaining clothes than Castiel is, and their difference in size is practically negligible. Dean, of course, is not thinking of that kind of convenience when he sees Castiel dressed in his garments. His gaze is hungry and roving, with a hint of that old disbelief that has yet to go fully away.

Castiel leans back on the bed, braced on his elbows. “How would you like me?”

“You mean, besides for the rest of my life?” Dean says. “On your back? That okay?”

“Of course. Further up or...?”

“Yeah.” Dean swallows while Castiel scoots up his bed, far enough that he rests his head on the pillows and tests their give – they’re excellent, of course. The mattress shifts when Dean rests a knee on the bed. “Actually, can you just lie there for a while? So I can just... look?”

Castiel smiles at Dean and lets himself relax. Goodness knows he understands the appeal of this, for he’s spent quite some time watching Dean sleep or doing other things while unaware that Castiel’s watching him. So when Dean sits on the bed, Castiel pays that no heed, and instead focuses on the ceiling. There’s little plastic shapes stuck up there – not stars, exactly, but something similar, which is curious.

Castiel doesn’t look away from those plastic shapes even when Dean touches him. Dean’s fingers are light around his ankle, and then trail feather-light against the hair up to his calves. At his knees they linger, tracing the knobby shape, before slipping inside Castiel’s thighs and moving in curved shapes. Dean does like to touch Castiel a lot but this feels new, especially in the way Dean seems to be keeping a purposeful distance, sitting a few inches away from Castiel’s body.

“Did you put those up there?” Castiel asks.

“Mm?” Dean says distantly. His thumb is moving teasingly just inside the edge of Castiel’s (Dean’s) boxers, as though he can’t decide what to do next. “Oh, yeah. I was in one of those phases where glow-in-the-dark stickers were the coolest thing *ever* but I ran out of them before I finished the ceiling, and it annoyed the hell out of me. You know what else I wanted to do?”

“What?” Castiel inhales sharply when Dean’s hand moves up and into the shorts, knuckles brushing the length of his cock.

“I was gonna put these awesome charm decals on the windows,” Dean says. “I got it on the one of the left, no problem, but then it reacted badly with... something, the light, we think? And it turned a heinous shade of orange.” Dean manages to talk evenly while he’s fondling Castiel, for he is indeed fondling Castiel with a casualness that is surprisingly arousing, as though Dean could be satisfied doing nothing more than this the whole day.

Perhaps it's not just the touch; the clothes, the bed, the everything in this place is a part of Dean, and by having Castiel here, he's taking another step in making Castiel a part of him. Castiel knows with certainty that Dean's fantasized about this before, too, for he is too calm, too measured in his movements. He has wanted Castiel spread out on his bed, dressed in his clothes and completely untouched except for the one hand up his boxers.

"Will you make me come like this?" Castiel asks.

"I don't know," Dean says honestly. "Think you can?"

"With you? Of course."

"Kinda dirty, though, isn't it?" Dean laughs. "Like you're just wanting a nap, and here I am pawing at your dick."

"Technically you're not pawing at my dick," Castiel points out. "You're just moving your hand vaguely inside my underwear."

"Got you hard though, didn't it?"

Castiel nods. "I cannot deny that."

Dean adjusts his position on the bed, half-leaning over Castiel but keeping their bodies apart. He's allowed them contact through the one, persistent hand that's now making gentle pulls down Castiel's length. Castiel helpfully spreads his legs but instead of Dean going faster, he just tilts his head and uses his other hand to pull lightly at the hem of the boxers – so he can get a good look inside, apparently.

"Okay," Castiel says, breathless. "That does feel somewhat dirty."

"I know right," Dean says quietly, still peering up Castiel's shorts. "Good?"

"Yes," Castiel hisses, his thighs tense and straining. "I don't know why, but yes. How are you able to focus?"

"I genuinely have no idea." Dean's petting Castiel's cock more firmly now, but he hasn't done a thing about his own erection. "It's so weird, isn't it? Until like ten minutes ago I was nervous as hell, and now it's just..." He shrugs.

There's something in there about Dean's desire to please and impress Castiel (which is still the strangest thing, because Dean could impress Castiel with a sneeze), but there is no chance to ruminate on that with Dean's fingers being so distracting. They can't get a good angle but it doesn't matter, because the restrictive cotton of Dean's boxers is doing a fine supporting job of giving the rest of Castiel's dick something to rub against.

It seems to go on forever, with Castiel pinned solidly in place by Dean's hand and Dean's attention. It's fine, though, because Castiel hasn't felt this safe and comfortable since they left Anna's cottage. He's happy to bask in the moment and let Dean play with him as much as he wants, so he's almost disappointed when he feels an orgasm finally approach.

“Dean,” Castiel whispers. “Close.”

“Cool.” Dean brings his second hand into proper use, pulling the boxers tight around Castiel’s erection. “Get it.”

That leaves Castiel to jerk his hips up in the firm cloth prison, chasing his pleasure with the desperation he knows Dean wants to see. He braces his feet on the bed and thrusts up in one angle and then another, trying to find the best way to find his relief. Somewhere in the knot of the boxers, Dean manages to squeeze his fingers around Castiel’s cockhead, and that, blessedly, is enough.

It’s messy, but that’s the point. Castiel gasps and whines through his pleasure, and then, once he’s dutifully spilled as much as he can into Dean’s underwear, slumps back onto the bed. Spent and panting, he stays lax while Dean untangles his hands from the damp boxers. After a beat, Dean makes a thoughtful sound, pulls the boxers almost primly back into place, and then – in a rush of movement – drapes himself on top of Castiel’s body.

“Guh,” Castiel says, just before Dean kisses him. Post-coital kisses and cuddles are nice, but the stained clothing between them is definitely unusual. It’s mildly distracting, but Dean seems to be really into it – Castiel makes a note of that for later.

“Welcome to the Winchester home, buddy,” Dean says.

Castiel laughs. “It’s quite a welcome.”

“Gotta be a good host.” Dean leans back, head propped up on one elbow, and takes in his handiwork. “God damn.”

“Any requests, Dean?” Castiel huffs softly when Dean’s eyes flicker downwards. “Would you like my mouth? I am amenable.”

“Dude, how do you *do* that?” Dean asks. “It sounds like you’re just making an order at the post office or something, not, you know, offering to deep throat me.”

“I guess I never picked up on those soft skills.” Castiel waits, and then helpfully parts his lips, which has Dean inhaling sharply. He can’t waggle his eyebrows as impressively as Dean can, but he tries.

“In *that* case.” Dean sits up and starts unbuckling his pants. “You can see the rest of the house later.”

They’d discussed at length where to do the breaking ritual. Coming here wasn’t just a chance for Dean to show off his family home; the Winchester seat is a brazen personal choice and

speaks to the position Castiel has in Dean's family despite their performing the unbinding. It says that Castiel and Dean remain a unit, and have chosen each other beyond the legalities of the marriage they're now drawing to a close.

At least, that is the message that they hope to send. It wasn't even Castiel's idea – it was Sam's, because he knows the power of presentation as well as Dean and Castiel do. Of the lot of them, it was only Anna who had doubts, wondering if Lawrence would be one of the first places that Naomi would search for them. That is a legitimate worry, which is why they're using their advantage of time and moving as quickly as is possible.

This means that Dean and Castiel only have the house to themselves for half a day. In that time they manage to sleep, eat, make out on the porch swing, and watch a movie from the proud Winchester collection. After that it's time for the second and third sets of arrivals to get there.

The second group is Anna and Calliope, who bring with them all the necessary props for the ritual they'll be performing. Dean and Castiel welcome them and assist in preparations, ensuring that everything is ready by the time the third set arrives a few hours later. That group is Mary and Sam, for they'd decided it was best that John stay back at the capital to keep up the illusion of the rest of the Winchesters' presence.

"Did you manage see to Hannah and the others before you left?" Castiel asks as they usher Sam and Mary into the house.

"Yeah, they're fine," Sam says. "They've got a comfortable little protest going on in the square, plastered your house emblem all over the place twinned with the Winchester badge. Plus there's rumors you've set up an operations base somewhere super duper secret."

"And super duper far," Dean adds. "Like, three whole counties over."

"Dean," Mary says, sounding mildly scandalized. "You could give Castiel some of your nicer things to wear."

"What, he looks nice," Dean says. Castiel's wearing another faded shirt, plus some old slacks that Dean outgrew but never got around to throwing out. "He does."

"I hope you don't mind," Calliope calls out from the dining room. "But I'd like to remind everyone that I'm being paid by the quarter hour."

"That's a very generous reminder," Anna says sincerely. She's hefting a camera she'd borrowed from Charlie, and waves the lens cap vaguely in Dean and Castiel's direction. "Come on, the sooner we do this, the sooner Naomi can move her attention elsewhere."

The group shuffles into the dining room where Calliope is ready in her robes, when Sam half-heartedly asks if he can get a drink before they start. Dean sighs and shoos Sam off, saying that he'd rather his brother not be dehydrated for his impending divorce.

"It's not a *divorce* divorce," Sam calls out from the kitchen as he rummages through the fridge. "It's, like, an IOU."

“Oooh,” Dean says. “I like that. Hey Cas, IOU a tat and a vow and my heart. Okay, scratch the heart – that’s totally yours anyway.”

“As mine is yours,” Castiel says instantly.

Dean grins and winks in his direction. It’s impressive how only a few days ago he’d protested this move, but is now so self-assured that he can joke about it. Maybe their having sex in Dean’s bedroom confirmed Castiel’s permanent place in his life. It *is* a divorce – a legal one, not an emotional one – but that doesn’t change the nature of the breaking.

Sam wanders back into the room and takes his place at Mary’s side, both of them talking softly. Castiel can’t make out the words, focused as he is on the heavy rustle of the papers Calliope’s checking. She has the contract, her notes, plus the divorce filing papers that they’ll be submitting to the nearest temple once this is completed.

“Good day,” Calliope says, her tone calm and modulated as she reads off the protocol checklist. “I request that the attendees say their full names for the record.”

So this is it, Castiel and Dean identifying themselves as they face each other, Calliope standing next to them as their cleric, Anna taking pictures, Sam and Mary filling out the witness list. They are all here today to make a bold move towards the freedom Castiel’s never let himself fully imagine becoming a part of his life, because why would the cousin of the King on a blacklisted branch of the family tree dare to dream of such things? Castiel believed for such a long time that he isn’t as brave Anna, but maybe he was wrong.

Castiel knew there would be, but he’s still surprised by the déjà vu that washes over him in presenting himself this way, Dean presenting himself like he did for their wedding in the grand temple. It’s a smaller affair now but no less weighty – actually it’s even weightier, for Castiel knows Dean now in ways he couldn’t have imagined back then. How instant it shall be; they are married, but in a few minutes, they will not be. How novel.

“Marriage is a holy union,” Calliope says, “and the temple weeps if it cannot be kept. Every effort must be made towards reconciliation, because reconciliation in love is the best of all things. I must request that the married tell me they wish it to be broken.”

“Yes,” Castiel says. “I wish it to be broken.”

“Yes, I wish it to be broken,” Dean says.

Three times is the requirement, so Calliope goes, “I must request that the married confirm that they are sound of mind and spirit, and they wish it to be broken.”

“I am sound of mind and spirit, and I…” Castiel takes a breath. “I wish it to be broken.”

“I’m sound of mind and spirit, and wish it to be broken.” Dean says.

“I must request that this the attendees confirm that they are not being coerced in any way,” Calliope continues, “and it is true that they are desirous of it being broken.”

Through this longer spiel Castiel becomes aware of how tense he is – his shoulders tight, his neck stiff – and it isn't mere awkwardness. It is a fact that he wants him and Dean to love each other freely and unencumbered by the contract, yet wanting that isn't the same thing as wanting *not* to be married. Castiel isn't desirous of it being broken, not *really*, but he will say it, because he has to.

Although Castiel knew the words that Calliope would be using today, he's still startled at hearing them spoken, just as he's startled by the half-lie he must say.

A half-lie on top of other half-lies and full lies he's had to say his whole life because it was expected of him, because everyone else had opinions of where he would best be useful and things he would best do and places he would be best placed so to be out of the way. Castiel thinks of the inquiries he'd sat on as a child about his parents, of Zachariah's always putting his hands on Castiel's shoulders when he'd regaled in full detail how *kind* he was for taking Castiel and Anna in, and of Michael's long letters telling Castiel that it would be to everyone's advantage if he didn't make trouble like his sister or indeed ever refer to her existence ever again.

Calliope is looking at Castiel.

"I am," Castiel says, mouth dry, "desirous of it being broken."

Dean's voice seems to be coming from a long distance away as he echoes the phrase.

Does it make sense for Castiel to tell a half-lie today in order to achieve freedom afterwards? This whole thing made sense a moment ago but they're ending their *marriage*, and there's a gaping maw of two years afterward where anything can happen. Dean loves him, wouldn't leave him, but he *could* leave him – because he is technically capable of doing that, and then Castiel will be alone all over again.

The thought terrifies. Castiel isn't a child anymore, and he isn't being shifted around from one household to another as is convenient for other people, but it took him too long to realize that the only life he knew wasn't normal for most people. It took him even longer to realize that there are ways to step outside that kind of thinking to be true to himself, and of all the things Castiel fears in this moment, the greatest one is probably the possibility of regressing. If the bond is broken then maybe Castiel will just fly away, forgotten and lost like some useless scrap of paper, and that would be insurmountably awful.

Calliope is still reciting the last of the rites, and unwrapping the knife she'll use in the ritual proper. Castiel tries to watch her but his eyes are starting to blur, which is wholly inappropriate because he *chose* to do this, it was his idea, yet his body is betraying him by sending wetness down his cheeks for no logical reason whatsoever.

This happens to Castiel sometimes. He will be okay with something for a long while, until he's suddenly and vehemently *not*. When Anna left, it was weeks before Castiel processed that loss; when he agreed to Michael's marriage proposal, he was accepting of it until he made the trip over and decided that, no, he wasn't going to lose his virginity that way. Castiel believes that he's generally a calm soul, but there are still short circuits inside him, and they make themselves known at most inopportune moments.

So Castiel ducks his head, turns aside, tries to make his unnecessary panic less visible. It's stupid, *he's* stupid, and he knows he's being stupid, but he doesn't know how to make himself stop.

It's just that he loves Dean so much and he's repaid that faith and generosity by asking for a divorce. Dean didn't even want to do it, but Castiel made him. What kind of person is he, that he would ask for such a thing? Will he always be like this, worrying about ways that people can use him or them?

Whatever their promises to each other, he and Dean are losing something by performing this unbinding, and it's Castiel's fault.

A faint whisper interrupts Castiel's thoughts. It's Dean, his quiet, "Hey," only loud enough for Castiel to hear. It's embarrassing as fuck to be seen like this, and Castiel would rather close his eyes entirely but Calliope is opening her hands now and gesturing for them to approach her.

Castiel opens his sleeve and offers his binding arm out, just as Dean offers his. Castiel's arm is shaking a little, as if it isn't enough that his shirt (Dean's shirt) is damp with tears that have yet to stop. He can't even defend himself – *I'm sorry, I don't know what's come over me, I'm scared for no good reason whatsoever, I'm trying* – because it would interrupt the ceremony, so he just lets Calliope arrange their tattoo forearms parallel, close but not touching, and raise the gold knife over it.

Castiel grits his teeth to hold his arm still, because it *needs* to be still for this to work, and he has to do it by himself. His face and neck burn when he realizes that Calliope is waiting, perfectly patient and perfectly professional, while Castiel is being hot mess because he happens to have some deeply-rooted childhood traumas that rear their heads at inopportune moments.

Calliope, at least, knows what to do. Castiel manages to keep his arm still for maybe two seconds, and those two seconds are all she needs. She isn't a highly-qualified priestess for nothing, and she moves the knife only twice – cutting down from Dean's to Castiel's tattoo in one gesture, and back from Castiel's to Dean's in the next. The ink around the cuts glow a faint gold, but because of the layer of corruption it takes a while to spread through the entire binding. At some points it even bubbles red, almost angrily, before burning the ink fully out of their arms.

Then the tattoos are gone, leaving behind only the scars along Castiel's forearm, and he thinks – *well*. This is indeed the end of a chapter, and it wasn't even a wholly unhappy chapter. It was unhappy in *parts*, but definitely not the whole, and what's next?

What happens next?

Castiel's lungs decide to seize up, turning his next breath into a tight half-sob. To his humiliation, Dean's on him immediately, wrapping his arms around Castiel in a grip that seems almost desperate. Dean holds him so often but right now his grip is almost vicelike, solid and unyielding, and absent its usual softness.

“It is broken,” Calliope says politely.

With the ceremony done, Castiel says, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no, hey,” Dean whispers. “I’m not going anywhere, okay? I’m not leaving you.”

Castiel thought he’d regained some composure but that flees immediately at Dean’s determined statement. Castiel buries his face in Dean’s neck but he doubts that helps much in keeping him quiet.

Dean knows, Dean saw right through him. Dean’s seen Castiel vulnerable many times before, and each time brings its own terror and shame, but this feels the worst of the lot. Dean’s proven his devotion to Castiel over and over again, so he shouldn’t *have* to say such things just because Castiel has baggage he hasn’t fully shaken off yet.

“I love you, okay?” Dean’s hands are firm on Castiel’s head and back, holding him close and safe. Castiel clings back as Dean moves them into a gentle swaying motion, meant to be calming. “I’m right here, and I’m always gonna be here.”

“I know,” Castiel says wetly. “I’m just…”

“Don’t worry,” Dean insists. “It’s fine, let it out.”

Castiel tries to take a deep breath. After a few attempts he even manages to be successful, and Dean hums with him through it. When Castiel has enough air back in his lungs, he says, “Marry me, Dean.”

“Yes,” Dean says. “Obviously.”

“Really?” Castiel says.

“Dude.” Dean draws back and, despite there being all sorts of grossness on Castiel’s face, leans in to kiss him. Castiel is so surprised that he can barely respond, but Dean doesn’t seem to mind. Dean kisses him on his mouth, his cheek, his nose, the space just above his eye.

“This is me. Of course the answer’s yes.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sexual content: Penetration, multiple orgasms.

Castiel wakes to the sound of a door being closed. He blinks groggily and registers that he's tucked snugly inside a soft blanket, and the mattress beneath him is pretty darn cozy. This is Dean's bed, which shifts some at the addition of a new body on it. Castiel sincerely hopes that it's Dean, because he doesn't have the fortitude to deal with anyone else at the moment.

"Hey," Dean says, his voice so gentle that there's no point at getting irritated at his assumption that Castiel's already awake. Castiel's eyes drift back shut as Dean makes himself comfortable on the bed, lining his body behind Castiel's and settling an arm around his torso. "Guess who loves you."

Castiel grunts.

Dean taps his fingers delicately across Castiel's ribs. "Who loves you?"

"You do," Castiel says.

"Got it in one." Dean rubs his chin against Castiel's shoulder. "You hungry?"

"No."

He pauses. "You mad at me?"

"No." Castiel sighs. "I'm just embarrassed."

"About what?"

Castiel turns his face into the pillow, muffling his response: "Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not... hey." Dean locks his arm tight around Castiel, tugging him closer so his breath is warm on Castiel's cheek. "Not making fun of you at all. So you got upset that we got divorced. Not something to be ashamed about, in my book."

Castiel thought that the nap would've dulled some of his emotions of earlier, but he was wrong. That said, he's not in the mood for a fight, so he stays pointedly silent at Dean's comment.

"Cas," Dean says. "You care so much. Every time I think you can't be more – and then you *are* – and it's..."

“I made a scene.” Castiel opens his eyes and turns his face, ostensibly to glare at Dean, but his breath catches at the way Dean is looking at him. Dean’s face is so close, his golden-flecked eyes perfectly focused on Castiel, his gaze equal parts fond and intense. Castiel’s next words are weaker. “In front of everyone.”

“Because you’re just *that* into me,” Dean says smugly.

Castiel makes an annoyed sound but he knows he’s already smiling, helpless before the onslaught of Dean’s grin. “It was my idea to break the binding in the first place, so what right do I have to be upset about it when it’s time to do the deed?”

“Knowing you gotta do something isn’t the same as being able to do it once you get there. Come on, you know this.”

Castiel wriggles restlessly in Dean’s arms, embarrassment warming his face again. It’s always difficult to hold on to his temper when Dean’s like this, and Castiel *wants* to bask in his discomfort for a while longer. Dean loosens his grip, probably to let Castiel pull away, but Castiel squeezes a hand around Dean’s bicep. “I know, Dean. It’s just – I’m sorry, I got overwhelmed.”

“Brains are weird sometimes,” Dean says. “I mean, it’s like... When we got married the first time, I thought I was okay with it until I got to the altar. In that moment it’s like all the noise went away, all the people poking at me went away, so it was just me and my thoughts. And I could see the rest of my life stretching out in front of me, and it wasn’t a life that was completely mine. It got me thinking about everything else I could’ve done, or maybe should’ve done, before that moment, but lost my chance.”

Castiel stops moving. Dean’s words strike something true, which Castiel recognizes though he doesn’t think the description accurately mirrors his current feelings. Castiel takes pride in his ability to think through problems, and he’d certainly thought all about what it would mean to break the binding long before they’d stood for the ceremony. Castiel’s realizations weren’t new ones. But where Dean’s story talks of his imagining the future he’d been denied, Castiel’s mind looked back to a past of disappointments, and how he’d learned to take those disappointments because that was all he was good for.

“I know you care for me,” Castiel says. “I know that as surely as I know anything, yet as the binding was being broken I felt as though I was on the cusp of losing you, and through no one’s fault but my own. I know it’s ridiculous, but it felt like I was... I’m not making any sense, I’m sorry.”

“You gotta stop apologizing for stuff like that, man. It’s almost like...” Dean pauses, frowning. “Is that a thing?”

“What?”

“Is that like... Has this been a long time coming?” That makes little sense, but then Dean continues, “Cas, you’re one of the strongest people I know and I love you for it, but you don’t have to put on a face with me. If you’re sad or upset or whatever – I want to know. I won’t

always be good about it, but I'll try. Your feelings are real, and it's not a bad thing to have them."

How does Dean do this? Once again, with a few blunt observations Dean has made Castiel visible and vulnerable. Yet there is no fear in being seen this way – just relief, and dawning awareness. Castiel hadn't thought there could be anything malicious about the instinct to apologize, or the desire to not be a burden, but there it is.

"I know that, too," Castiel says quietly. "But more in theory than in practice. Thank you, I needed to hear it."

Dean grins. "I'm just full of surprises, huh?"

"No, it's... not a surprise that you would understand." Castiel tries to take a deep breath but it comes out shaky. "Hold me, please."

Dean obliges with remarkable efficiency, opening his arms just enough for Castiel to turn and tuck his face against Dean's chest, and then wrapping them firmly around him. There needs to be better words to describe the accompanying sensations, for 'warmth' and 'safety' seem insufficient. Castiel can *count* on Dean, through his small needs and greater needs, and just as vital is how Dean is perfectly content to count on Castiel in return.

"How are things outside?" Castiel asks. "Has Calliope gone off?"

"Ages ago," Dean says.

"Was I sleep that long?"

"Nah, she's just efficient," Dean says, amused. "Anna went with her to document the whole notarization thing."

"Did you make sure that none of the photos they're using feature me in tears?"

"Uh."

Castiel sighs. "Am I crying in all of them?"

"Not the early ones, where we're showing off the broken tats. You're totally dignified in those."

"Then I had to go and break out in dramatic weeping." Castiel thinks. "Some people will think I staged it."

"That would almost be more impressive. In addition to being totally bad-ass and authoritative, you're also capable of crying on a dime?"

"It would've been more plausible if it were you."

"Plausible, maybe, but I'm *already* the emotional one," Dean says cheerfully. "Much bigger impact coming from you."

Truth be told, Castiel can't remember the last time he wept like that. It certainly wasn't in recent memory. He isn't sure whether that's a good thing or not – on one hand it means there haven't been any massive hurts in his life, but on the other hand, is it indicative of how he's spent too long suppressing his emotions? Perhaps Dean was more accurate than he expected when he asked if this was a long time coming, the more so when it's only recently that Castiel developed the ability to look back on his life with a more critical eye.

"That was highly unusual for me," Castiel says, though Dean must know that already.

"And *this* is unusual for me," Dean replies. "So what?"

"This? Are you referring to having your husband—" Castiel starts.

"Fiancé," Dean says.

"Having your fiancé in your room."

"That is unusual, yes, but actually I was talking about all this cuddling and talking about feelings. *At the same time.*"

"How can that be?" Castiel asks. "You're so good at it."

Dean barks a laugh. "No, I'm really not."

"I disagree."

"That's only because it's easy when I'm around you." Dean adds quietly, "Everything's so easy with you."

That statement is even more pleasing than everything Dean's said since Castiel woke up, which was already a high bar to begin with. Self-centered it may be, but Castiel would be highly flawed if he couldn't appreciate the sentiment that someone like Dean – in tune with his emotions in ways that Castiel envies – could find further comfort from Castiel's presence. What a revelation that is.

"Dean." Castiel doesn't feel turned on the way he usually is when Dean touches him, but he feels a yearning for something – further intimacy on top of the one they're already sharing. Is it possible to have a craving *for* desire, without actually being immersed that desire? Dean will probably always confuse him like this. "Dean, I want you."

"I'm right here," Dean says with a laugh.

"No, I want..." Castiel scratches his fingers lightly across Dean's cloth-covered stomach, and smiles when Dean inhales sharply. "Would you take care of me?"

"Dude," Dean says, "that's way unspecific, especially for you."

"Sex, I think." Castiel gets a firm grip on Dean's waist, using the leverage to draw himself up towards Dean's mouth. "Yes, that'd be nice." Once close enough, Castiel fits his hand to the

side of Dean's face, palm on his cheek and thumb on his lips, thus continuing his efforts to physically memorize every part of his husband – fiancé.

"I hope this isn't for my sake," Dean says, gentle but with warning. "You're kinda beat."

"No, I honestly think I'd enjoy it." Castiel takes Dean's hand and draws it into the space between Castiel's legs. "I'm not quite ready, but I think you would be most skilled in getting me there."

Dean wets his lips. "So goddamned polite."

"I try my best."

Castiel may not be there but Dean's well on his way, his eyes already dark as he rolls on top of Castiel, and his breath already short as he slots their mouths together. Any difference Castiel feels in their kisses is purely in his head, for their marital status should have no bearing whatsoever on the sensations of their bodies. Castiel was simply used to thinking of them as married, and he'd taken far more gratification in that legal status than he'd thought.

A pang of sadness hits Castiel in the gut and he turns away sharply, catching his breath. "Sorry," he says. "Sorry, I keep thinking – I keep thinking how we're not married anymore, and it – I – it's upsetting."

"Okay," Dean says. "So is this the kind of upsetting where you want to go back to cuddling, or the kind where I should keep going?"

"I want to do this," Castiel says firmly. "Nothing's changed, right? Between us?"

"Not where it matters." Dean's easy confidence is comforting. "I'm still crazy about you. In case you were wondering."

Castiel tries to regulate his breathing. "We'll still get a house for ourselves?"

"Of course. With your garden, my garage, our library, the works."

"The movie room."

"With a pull-out sofa." Dean does not leer at all. "Just thinking ahead, you know me."

"Yes." Castiel takes a deep breath and then hooks his hand at the back of Dean's head. "Yes, all right, where were we?"

Dean laughs softly but gently sets his lips back against Castiel's. Castiel does want this, regardless of how he's a little clumsy and shaken from their *getting divorced*, so he's glad that Dean believes him enough to take a tender yet firm lead in the proceedings, offering slow alongside feather-light touches across Castiel's arms and sides. Even so, Castiel almost feels frustrated because he *knows* what it's like to be consumed by desire but it isn't happening like that today. Dean's tongue is in Castiel's mouth and Dean's thumb is sliding across his nipple, but Castiel's body is sluggish and slow to react.

Dean doesn't seem to mind. He seems content to keep kissing him, to keep touching him – thus proving yet again that for all his loudness he is a man who knows how to take his time. Dean exudes sensuality and contentment, and his every touch tells Castiel: *relax*. Castiel need only trust Dean to take care of him, because Dean is Castiel's shield from the world. So Castiel sighs into Dean's kisses, clutches at his shoulders, opens his legs so Dean may press between them.

It's only with Dean's perseverance that Castiel finally feels that familiar stirring low in his stomach. Dean pulls back, breathing heavily but cautious. "You okay?"

"Yes," Castiel says. "Thank you."

"I was gonna make a joke about how maybe I don't do it anymore for you." Dean smirks. "But this is kinda fun."

"The heart is willing. Nay, *determined*."

"And does the body have any requests?"

Castiel makes a face. "I have to decide?"

"Not if you don't wanna," Dean says. "It's cool, I like driving."

Castiel will make this up to Dean later, when he can be attentive, thoughtful, and fully dedicated to Dean's needs. (There will be many later.) He simply doesn't have the energy for that right *now*, and would rather let Dean take charge in undressing Castiel and then propping Castiel up against a small hill of pillows. This leaves Castiel perfectly positioned for watching Dean rise up onto his knees and strip, pulling his shirt up inches by incremental inches, and then laughing as he tosses it aside.

"Always a showman." Castiel raises his eyebrows when Dean hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts and starts shimmying his hips from side to the side. "I would tell you that you're exquisite, but you know that already."

"Tell me anyway." Dean winks. "Never get tired of that."

"You are more enthralling the more I'm around you," Castiel says. "Your eyes, they're so... And your hands... And I like the way your navel moves when you do that."

"Do what?" Dean looks down and jiggles his stomach a little. "This?"

"Yes, that. It's very nice."

"The family jewels are about to fall out and you're looking at my *belly button*?"

"Your dick is very nice, too," Castiel says.

Dean goes still, and fondness overtakes his features. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't have to – Castiel knows. Dean is feeling what Castiel is feeling, and this awareness of each

other has a place of certainty in Castiel's heart. The moment then passes when Dean shakes his head and says, "So's yours, now let that bad boy out so I can hop on."

Castiel shouldn't find that statement romantic but he does; such is life when one has been recalibrated by Dean's presence. "Aren't you going prepare yourself first?"

"That too." Dean's performance is an effective diversion, so much so that Castiel's heart doesn't race for the wrong reasons when he glimpses the clear stretch of skin on Dean's left arm. Castiel reminds himself that it's just temporary, the way that a great deal other things in their current situation are temporary.

Better to focus on Dean's joy in the moment, the way he revels putting himself on display. Dean is practically glowing under the attention, eyes gleefully locked on Castiel's as he cocks his legs and pushes his lube-wet fingers up his ass. It's very a nice ass, too, Castiel observes – excellent for holding, petting, and even simply admiring from a distance. Dean's ass is also excellent when it's resting on Castiel's lap, as what happens when Dean's done opening himself up and climbs on top of him.

"It isn't quite..." Castiel sits back against the pillows and lets Dean settle on him, strong thighs on either side of Castiel's body. "That can't be comfortable."

"Sure it is, just – oh right." Dean leans away, tapping a hand down on something beyond Castiel's line of sight, and then the distinct trills of electric guitars fill the room. "Mood music."

Castiel scowls. "This is mood music?"

"Mood music," Dean echoes as climbs back onto Castiel's lap. "It's a big house, but not *that* big, Cas."

"Oh. Right."

"It's cool, they'll know to stay away. And now..." Dean squints in concentration, tongue peeking out the side of his mouth as he reaches back to find Castiel's cock.

Castiel sighs at the touch of Dean's fingers, fumbling at first along his shaft, and then carefully guiding it to its target. Castiel likes to close his eyes for this part, so to better appreciate the press of his cockhead to Dean's opening, followed by the half-second where the muscle gives and Dean starts taking him. It's a slow process, with Dean sheathing him inch by careful inch and Dean's fingers keeping Castiel cock in place until gravity can take over.

When Dean's seated at last, Castiel opens his eyes and exhales. Dean's panting but his eyes are half-lidded, peaceful. He winds a strong arm around Castiel's shoulders, locking their bodies together as he starts to grind. Castiel does his part to help, his hands gripping Dean's waist and his hips rolling with Dean's pace.

Actually, this position is quite nice, aside from Castiel's mild worry that it's straining Dean's legs. Castiel likes it when Dean's face is close, though he knows that's not always practical.

He also likes it when Dean holds him, which he's sort of doing now, so there's a whole slew of good things going on aside from the obvious part where Dean's bouncing on his dick.

"I enjoy being with you so much." Castiel gasps when Dean finds a particularly good angle. "It's so – you're so – there's so much, I don't know there can be so – *Dean*."

"Yeah," Dean breathes. "Yeah, okay."

It moves quickly from there, which is frustratingly typical. Castiel never lasts long when he's inside Dean, no matter the efforts he's expended in trying to improve his stamina. He just gets distracted by the silken heat working him over, clenching rhythmically on his dick and drawing immense pleasure with every roll of their bodies. It doesn't matter if Castiel's on top or if it's like this with Dean setting the pace – the final effect is always the same. The only thing Castiel usually can do is get Dean hot and bothered *before* going inside him, which normally ensures that Dean gets his release first, but he didn't have the chance for that today.

"Dean," Castiel gasps. "Dean, slow down, I'm going to..."

"That's the idea." Dean's released Castiel's shoulder in order to put both hands on the headboard behind Castiel, effectively gaining extra leverage for his solid fucking down. "That tight enough for you?"

"Yes, it's very—" Castiel strains the muscles in stomach, staving off the first tingles of an impending orgasm. "But you're supposed to – get first—"

"Christ, Cas, no need to get polite about it." How Dean is able to talk coherently while setting his bed a-jumping, Castiel has no idea. "I *want* you to come."

Castiel grits his teeth, unable to voice the opinion that he's definitely going to at this rate.

"Am I going to have to up my game?" Dean pauses for a half-second and then changes his rhythm, moving his hips in a circular motion that has sparks going off behind Castiel's eyelids. "Just let go, Cas. Let me feel you."

The request is polite and seems earnest enough, so Castiel doesn't feel so bad when his body stiffens at the crest of pleasure. At the release comes relief, followed by the fuzzy but calm head space that makes Castiel realize that, looking back, he'd been tied in anxious knots for *hours*. Now he's not, and it's because Dean's right here, in his arms and running his lips tenderly over Castiel's temple.

Castiel exhales slowly, one breath after another. Through the post-coital haze Castiel realizes that Dean's fingers are trailing along his forearms. In fact, those fingers are lingering over the scarred skin where his tattoo used to be, and this has Castiel opening his eyes abruptly, and he catches the wistful look on Dean's face before it's replaced with a hopeful smile.

"Feel better?" Dean asks.

"You're sad, too." Castiel shakes his head when Dean rolls his eyes. "I've been selfish again."

“Cas. I’m bummed about it, but it’s not a competition.” Dean laughs when Castiel wraps his arms firmly around Dean’s torso, holding him close. “Cas, it’s fine. In a way, you freaking out actually helped me get my head together. I got to focus on making you feel better, which made me feel better.”

Castiel scowls. “I’m keeping you.”

Dean blinks a little, startled. Then he smiles slowly, and it’s like the sun rising. “Yeah, you are. Do you want to get another tat?”

“We can’t get married again yet,” Castiel says unhappily. “The termination rules are clear, even if we do have a case on proving their ill-intent. We’ll still need to wait until the first term has passed, whatever the outcome. Roll over.”

“What? Why?”

“So I can pleasure you,” Castiel says in exasperation. “You haven’t come yet.”

“No, wait, I was – the *tattoo*, don’t change the subject.” Dean shakes his head. “I didn’t mean a marriage tat, I meant, you know, a mundane one. Each. For both us, one each.”

Castiel frowns. “Just a normal one?”

“Yep,” Dean says. “It won’t count for anything legal, of course, but that’s not the point.”

The point is that it’ll be theirs, and only theirs. Any meaning imbued in it will solely be of their making, and it will carry them through the legal waiting period. Castiel is warmed by the thought of Dean coming up with this while he was napping, because of course Dean is far more efficient in coming up with ideas of their future.

“Yes,” Castiel says. “Yes, Dean, I’d like that.”

Dean’s grin is blinding. “Yeah? Wanna go over designs? ”

“You’re lodged on my penis.”

“Oh yeah.” Dean looks down to where they’re joined, eyebrows raised in mock surprise. “Fair’s fair, how about I get what *I* want now?”

Castiel nods. “I’m agreeable with that.”

It’s an honest answer, though a few minutes later Castiel is doubting the wisdom of it. He didn’t expect that what Dean wants would involve Castiel lying on his stomach, with one leg cocked so to give space for Dean to go exploring. Castiel has a perfectly decent mouth – Dean’s said as much on a number of occasions – but Dean seems to be in the mood for a reciprocal satisfaction.

“Not that I mind,” Castiel says, voice slightly muffled from the pillow beneath his face, “but shouldn’t I be doing this? Seeing as how you...?”

“You’re exhausted, Cas.” Dean hums thoughtfully against the small of Castiel’s back, which he suspects has been littered with a large number of sucking kisses by now. How Dean manages to do that *while* working two wet fingers inside Castiel is impressive. “It’s been a long day.”

“You were right there with me for that long day. At least *I* had a nap.”

“But you also just did a number on my ass, which takes a lot out of a guy.” Dean puts his free hand on Castiel’s waist and squeezes. “It does take a lot out of a guy, right?”

“If that’s a coy way of asking if it was good, yes it was. And naturally I would like it to be good for you as well.”

“It’s gonna be,” Dean says, with certainty. “Okay, just... let me know if it’s too much? I’m going to, uh...”

“Hmm?” Castiel jumps when Dean’s fingers go deeper. This movement is less about preparation and more searching, the fingertips just brushing his prostate. The sensation strikes hot up his spine and is changed, sharper from how it usually is. Castiel hisses, but reaches back to grab at Dean when the fingers ease up. “It’s okay, it’s... different, but it’s fine.”

“Okay.” Dean’s kisses move lower down Castiel’s body, following the curve of his ass. The sensation of Dean’s teeth dragging along his skin is curious, but not unpleasant. Dean’s fingers also slide back in, more careful and only teasing near Castiel’s prostate.

Castiel isn’t sure whether to push against the intrusion or pull away; direct contact is too much, yet he’s intrigued by the idea of focusing on that pleasure center now, in the wake of an orgasm already passed. Since there’s no pressure to chase completion, these ministrations are to be enjoyed for their own sake. Castiel lets himself do just that, rocking his body in acceptance of Dean’s probing fingers. He’s already relaxed but he feels himself relax even further, allowing the strange sensations to flicker and settle through his body.

With no immediate goal before him, Castiel’s thoughts drift. He thinks about how Dean’s so careful, so generous, and that he has to remember to be always careful and generous in return. He thinks about how by asking for a matching mundane tattoos, it technically means that Dean got to propose as well, which is delightful as *fuck*.

Castiel’s pulled out of this pleasant headspace by the noises Deans’ making. He’s probably been increasing in volume for a while, but Castiel’s only just now registering Dean’s panting, sighing, and occasional shaky moans. In Castiel’s experience this means that Dean’s barely banking his arousal, which is immensely flattering, though perplexing.

“Dean?” Castiel says.

Dean exhales shakily. “What?”

“Are you all right?” Castiel tries to look over his shoulder, but it doesn’t help much. “You can go inside now, if you like. I’m not sure why you’re still...?”

There's a pause, and then Dean's shaking with laughter. "Jesus," he wheezes. "*Jesus.*"

"I just thought I'd point it out," Castiel says helpfully. "I'm more than adequately stretched."

"Kinda hard again, too."

"No, that's not..." Castiel glances down. "Oh."

Dean laughs outright, the sounds of mirth interspersed with deep, heaving gasps for air. His fingers slip out of Castiel and then he's moving up the bed, practically flopping on top of Castiel's back so to press his face to Castiel's shoulder, wrap an arm around his torso, and laugh some more.

"You're so..." Dean's laughs dissipate into chuckles, followed by one long exhale. Castiel would think Dean content to cuddle, if it weren't for the erection poking his back. "I want you so much."

"'Tis breaking news," Castiel says warmly.

"So *much*." Dean mouths hotly at Castiel's skin, his lips drawing patterns where they travel. Meanwhile his fingers curl against Castiel's chest, grabbing loosely at his pecs. "I want to – can I –"

"Yes," Castiel says.

Dean seems determined to stay pressed against Castiel's back, though this means that he has to reach down and clumsily angle his cock to where it's to be placed. Castiel laughs at Dean's clear excitement, his own arousal distant and irrelevant in the face of Dean's steady pushing into him. From the way Dean's shaking, one would think he's never done this with Castiel before, never had him in this way and other ways as often as they've been able to over the weeks they've been together (interludes in between notwithstanding).

It's not just arousal fueling Dean's actions, either. There is also glee, and it's clear in the way he grabs at Castiel, the sounds he makes when his thighs land flush at the back Castiel's.

"God, I can feel you."

"I would be quite worried if you didn't," Castiel says.

"No, not just—" Dean grinds against Castiel experimentally, "—I mean, I can feel you leaking out onto my thighs, man. And there's the burn, the awesome, awesome burn. But now I'm inside *you*, so it's almost like you're in front of me and at the back of me at the same and it's..."

"It's what, Dean?"

"I want to..." Dean carefully puts his hand on the back of Castiel's head. "Is this okay?"

"Yes," Castiel says. "I've had my satisfaction. You may hold me down and take yours as you will."

Dean doesn't immediately respond. Castiel starts to wonder if he should repeat the declaration, but then Dean's hand moves, pressing Castiel's head firmly to the mattress. The pressure is not so strong that Castiel can't keep his face at an angle and breathe, but the intent is clear – he is to stay where he is. This is perfectly fine by him. In fact, he'll make it easier for Dean by tilting his hips up as much as is comfortable, giving Dean a few extra degrees of movement in plowing him. And plow him, he does.

Permission given, Dean is rigorous. Castiel's panting rapidly but his breaths are slower still than Dean's thrust. There's the pull and the rolling push in quick succession – over and over again until Castiel is truly sorry that Dean cannot get any deeper.

This is the stamina that Castiel so envies. Dean is impressive, taking him with a fervor that would make Castiel breathless if he weren't already gasping at every snap of Dean's hips. Dean's been hard for quite a while now, and he's dealing with Castiel's squeezing around him when he can, yet Dean stays relentless. Dean is strong, his movements sure, his pace steady. It's not even that Dean's not that turned on – he's *very* turned on, as is evidenced by the wrecked sounds he's making over Castiel's shoulder.

Castiel loves this. Not just the act itself which is its own reward; he's enthralled with Dean's strength, his joy, his sheer confidence in the welcome of Castiel's body.

Dean starts to move his other hand down Castiel's chest towards his erection, but Castiel pushes it away firmly. Castiel's cock hurts a little from the overstimulation, so he'd rather just hold it against his stomach with one hand and leave it at that. Most of Castiel's attention is elsewhere anyway, on the places inside him that have been awakened with raw sensation. Dean's not even hitting his prostate directly; he knows he's not supposed to. In fact, Dean doesn't even have to. The teasing near-misses are exactly what Castiel needs, and it's enough to get his nerves singing in anticipation, his whole body tense in taking all the pleasure Dean is determined to give him.

"Cas," Dean growls, voice hoarse by Castiel's shoulder. "Wanna hear you, let me hear you."

Castiel unclenches his jaw, releasing the piece of bedding he'd been biting on. A deep breath, and then Dean's getting the noises he wants: a gasp to start with, and then a series of punched-out moans. It's almost laughably easy to do this, for Castiel need only leave his mouth open – the noises are conjured by Dean, who sends each thrust rattling up Castiel's body and finding release in sound.

Through the haze of lust Castiel recalls that they haven't been able to be this candid with their pleasure since... Joshua House, really. The privacy they've had since then has had its limitations – Anna's cottage, the Rexford hall and hospital, that poor storeroom in Speaker Hill – and Dean's caught on before Castiel, demanding full recompense now that they have the chance.

Castiel feels lewd, obscene, *powerful* – and he lets that be known in the noises he makes. His limbs are spread for Dean's pleasure, he can barely see for the blur of the bed being rocked, his ass is getting well fucked by a man on a mission to do nothing else. His dick is protesting a little, as though not quite sure if it can get there again, but Castiel will get there, he *will*, because Dean is fucking him like he means it.

The tipping point is when Dean starts to lose it. Castiel can't even see him and he knows when it happens, because Dean's movements get jerky, desperate, and his whines reach fever pitch, almost as though he's in pain. But it's pleasure that has him so – pleasure he's finding in Castiel's body, and that knowledge strikes hot and deep, startling a yell from Castiel's already hoarse throat, and then he's coming nice and neat on Dean's cock.

It seems to go on forever. Waves of pleasure seem to come from multiple points, raging against each other as though to burn Castiel from the inside out. But Castiel is determined to take it all, to savor every second and then coast all the way back home.

Meanwhile, Dean is having his own orgasm. He is groaning brokenly and shaking, body jerking with the last few half-thrusts as his body tries to get as deep as possible. Dean's fingers are gripping hard the flesh of Castiel's hips, which Castiel hopes mean that there'll be some lovely marks there for him to admire later. Castiel squeezes Dean through it, and then waits until exhaustion takes over and Dean half-falls on top of him.

A nudge and Dean's tipping over, allowing Castiel to turn onto his back and press his shoulder solidly against Dean's. They breathe together for a while, long enough that Castiel loses track of the number of songs that have changed over on Dean's cassette player.

"Cas." Dean's voice is delightfully fucked out. "You okay?"

Castiel inhales; of course Dean would ask that first. "Yes, are you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. That was, uh... that was good, too."

"How is it that that makes me feel safe?" Castiel says. "Us doing that, like *that*, makes me feel safe?"

There's an audible sound when Dean swallows. "Me, too."

"Really?" Castiel turns to look at Dean. He's surprised to find that Dean's blinking rapidly, and his eyes are bright. "Dean..."

"I wanna say thank you but it's not enough," Dean says, choked. "I don't know, I don't know what I'm saying, my head's all... But you're here and it's all gonna be okay, 'cause that's how I know it's gonna be okay. I remember you said once that it's like, you didn't know you could feel more, *be* more, until, uh... until me? I get it. I so get it."

Castiel just stares at Dean, floored. Then he nods, because even with the scattered phrases he does understand what Dean means. Castiel carefully turns a little to set his head on Dean's shoulder and take Dean's hand, intertwining their fingers together.

If Castiel were able to converse with himself from a year ago, could he adequately explain the route his life has taken since? He'd have no trouble sharing the machinations of those who always plot for their own gain, but would he have the vocabulary to explain Dean? Could he explain that there exists in the world a man who would find comfort in him, and who would feel loved *because* of him? Probably not.

The second nap is unintended, so when Castiel wakes up (again) the post-coital intensity is long gone, leaving him lethargic and mildly irritated. He would complain to Dean but he's gone, too, leaving a massive Dean-shaped space in the bed that does nothing for Castiel's state of mind. At least Dean wrapped the comforter around Castiel before he left.

It should be close to sunset now, so if Castiel were feeling hedonistic, he could just sleep on through to tomorrow. For a few seconds he even considers it, but then he sighs and sits up. He's been rude enough as it is, and he really should find out what's been happening with the rest of their plan.

The house is quiet when Castiel's done freshening up and exits Dean's bedroom. Left to his own devices, he lingers in the hallway and the top of the stairs, once again marveling that this place bore witness to Dean and Sam's childhood. That makes this house precious to Castiel by proxy, and he's amused at the possibility of it one day becoming a historical landmark. Stranger things have happened, after all.

As Castiel makes the slow descent of the stairs, he's surprised a flicker of jealousy in these thoughts. The Winchesters had a childhood so vastly removed from Castiel's own, with a house to call home and parents attuned to their needs. Of course their childhood wasn't perfect – nothing's *perfect* – but it's enough to inspire unintended resentment on the unfairness of the world.

Castiel shakes his head, ashamed at his pettiness.

Downstairs, there's no one in the living room, though there are signs of people having been there recently – the cushions are in disarray, and Anna's folders are open on the coffee table. Castiel wanders round to the kitchen and there's Mary Winchester, looking out the window with a mug in her hands.

“Oh!” Mary exclaims, turning around. “You're up. Would you like to join me? I just made some hot cocoa.”

“I don't think I...” Castiel trails off. “Actually, yes, that would be nice. Where is everyone?”

Mary pours out a mug for Castiel and hands it over. “Sam's off getting supplies, Anna and Calliope are still at the notary's office and Dean is... somewhere, I'm not actually sure.”

“Anna and Calliope are still filing the divorce?” Castiel says, surprised. “It shouldn't take that long, should it?”

“They haven't called, so I'm assuming they have it under control,” Mary says. “It could just be that whoever's at the office doesn't want to take on such a... distinctive case.”

“That would make sense.” Castiel takes a sip of the hot cocoa. “This is wonderful, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Mary says. “I hope you’re... feeling better?”

For a moment Castiel’s face goes hot when he thinks it’s an insinuation to his and Dean’s having sex, but then he parses her soft, sympathetic expression and remembers... earlier.

“Yes,” he says. “Um. I am, thank you.”

Mary hums a little, the sound too indistinct for Castiel to glean any meaning. Castiel’s not unfamiliar with awkward situations but he’s embarrassingly grateful for the cup of cocoa in his hands. It gives him something to do as he forces himself to stay in the same room as his (former/future) mother-in-law instead of giving in to the urge to flee.

Dean would know how to fix the moment, but Dean’s not here. It’s up to Castiel.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to make a scene, it’s just that I love your son so much, the thought of losing even one part of our relationship was... it was disquieting.” He’d forgotten that Mary, Sam, and Anna were even in the room, even.

Mary doesn’t reply. Every silent second that passes sets Castiel’s nerves further on edge, until he can’t stand it anymore and takes a look. Mary has put her mug down on the kitchen island and placed a hand over her mouth. She looks upset.

“I didn’t mean—” Castiel says quickly, “—I’m sorry, I—”

“No.” Mary’s tone is firm. “Don’t apologize for that.”

“But you’re...” Castiel is alarmed now, because Mary seems honestly, genuinely on the verge of tears. “I didn’t mean to trouble you with that.”

It seems to be the wrong thing to say, because Mary’s face contorts and there’s a single sob, followed by tears spilling down her cheeks. She seems to have under control after a few shaky breaths, but Castiel is rooted to the spot in horror.

“It’s not that,” Mary whispers. “It’s just that my baby got married when I wasn’t looking.”

“I...” Castiel should probably be quiet, but he feels it would be useful to point out, “I’m reasonably certain you were there when Dean and I were married.”

Mary laughs. “I don’t mean the ceremony. I meant...” She puts a hand over her heart.

“*Married.*”

“Oh,” Castiel says.

Mary is smiling even as another set of tears run down her cheeks. “I’ve always wanted that for my boys, I’m sure you... And it *happened*, and I *missed it*. I wouldn’t even listen to him when he told me, I’m—”

Castiel steps forward, closing the space between them. Mary is startled but accepts, opening her arms in letting Castiel hug her. This at least Castiel knows how to do, and he holds her

until Mary's sniffling subsides.

"You only wanted Dean to be safe," Castiel says. "Everything you've done has been out of love, and he knows that."

Mary pulls back and takes Castiel's arms in a firm grip. Her eyes shine with tears, but are fierce where they lock with Castiel's. "You are a precious one, aren't you?"

"I... can't say I've been called that any time recently."

"Dean's right," Mary says, "I haven't been fair to you."

Castiel blinks. "Fair about what?"

"I'd like to get to know you, Castiel," Mary says. "Cas. Is it all right if I call you Cas?"

"Of course, yes." Castiel is bewildered when Mary pats him on both cheeks before pulling away. "What would you like to know?"

"Goodness, where to start." Mary goes to the sink, where she quickly dabs her face clean. "I barely know anything about you. What about that university of yours? I've never been there, what's it like?"

"Oh, it's quite... It's different from here. Not that I've had the opportunity to visit any of the institutes of higher learning here, so I don't, uh..." Castiel clears his throat. "Let me try again."

"Please, sit with me." Mary sits at the kitchen island, and gestures for Castiel to take the stool next to her. "Don't forget your cocoa."

"Right, yes." Castiel tries not to think of this as an interview as he makes himself comfortable at the island. It might have been an interview *once*, if Mary posed these questions this way weeks ago, months ago – but now she's emanating warmth that dispels Castiel's doubts. "It's a good place. Quiet, beautiful, with some excellent students that made my time there worthwhile. Though I suppose it suffers the way all such schools do when they're outside the elite."

"Is that why you picked it?" Mary asks. "Because it's not elite?"

"It's as far as I could safely go, yes," Castiel says. "From court."

Mary nods. "This house serves a function similar to that."

Castiel cocks his head curiously. "You're not that far from the capital, or from the Campbell seat."

"It's not necessarily about distance," Mary says. "It's also location, and what a specific town or county means. Did Dean tell you the history of this area? No? It was a great estate once, but in the past few generations it's sort of turned into a place of retirement. Quite a few people moved here to get away from the hustle and bustle of the major cities, the Turners

among them. When this house opened up, they put in a good word for us. That, plus it's located almost precisely halfway between the Campbell seat and the Winchester one."

"That is a pointed decision," Castiel says. "And a tad mischievous."

Mary smiles and Castiel double-takes, startled by how similar that grin is to Dean's. Softer, sweeter, but definitely similar. "I thought you might appreciate that," she says. "I am sorry that you had to get away from your family in order to be yourself. I wish it didn't have to happen so often."

"I... I have better luck in pursuing a new family. If I may be so bold," Castiel adds quickly.

Mary touches his arm. "Of course you may."

They talk more about the University, of the places Castiel's been to in the Republic, of the few times Mary traveled to the Isles with her family (she hasn't been across the sea since she married John). It becomes easier to talk to her, and Castiel eventually stops hedging his opinions with *if that's all right* and *don't mind my saying*. Mary returns the favor.

Mary's about partway through describing John's relationship with the Men of Letters when Castiel realizes that this is the side of Mary that Dean's been telling him about. Dean's very vivid with his storytelling, but it's only in sitting here listening to Mary speak that Castiel sees another piece of that picture slot neatly into place.

A lull in the conversation arrives, long after Castiel's finished his cocoa but is unwilling to get up to replenish it. He toys with the mug handle for a moment while Mary eyes him curiously.

"You want to say something," Mary says.

"It's been said that it's appropriate to ask for... I mean." Castiel clears his throat, "When one has intentions towards someone else, it can be nice to ask for the blessing of... the other's parents? I probably should have waited until John got here."

"You can ask him, too," Mary says with a grin. "I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

Castiel huffs a laugh. "Is it right to ask? Is that something that you...?"

"You haven't had the most normal courtship." Mary sighs wistfully. "I'd imagined this moment – or something like it – many times, since even before my boys were old enough to date. Now I'm here, and it's like all the wisdom I'd wanted to impart upon you is... well, the horse has kinda left the barn."

"What kind of wisdom?" Castiel asks, curious.

"Oh, you know... the importance of trust, communication, and compromise, all those good things. Which would seem mighty ironic coming from *me*, *now*, after both of you had to get all of that down and then some to even make this far." Mary sounds proud, which is unexpected and sends a warm glow in Castiel's chest. "So... keep up that good work, and if

you ever need advice from someone who's had a couple of decades of marital experience under their belt, I'm here."

"I do," Castiel says. "Need help, that is."

Mary tilts her head. "About?"

Castiel's surprised at himself for bringing this up. Mary's offer may be genuine but he doubts she meant for dispensations of advice to take place *right now*. Yet with her expression so open, so free of judgment, Castiel feels compelled to speak.

"I love Dean and I want to spend the rest of my life with him," Castiel says. "There's no question about that. But when it comes to truly fulfilling that – making a household, living together, and perhaps one day having children... It's nice to want it in theory, but as it becomes more plausible I become more conscious of my inadequacies, since I never had, um..."

Mary swallows, her expression pinched.

"I'm not asking for pity," Castiel says. "I can't in good conscience look back on my past in pure discontent, because all of it lead me to where I am today. It's just that..."

"I get it," Mary says. "I can tell you this: your fears and worries about the future? Completely normal. Everyone has those, even those of us who had so-called 'typical' childhoods. Just because we might have had some hands-on experience, that doesn't mean we'll do everything correctly and never ever make mistakes. All you can do is try your best, and talk any issues out with your partner or anyone else you're comfortable with."

"You were afraid, too?" Castiel asks.

"God, yes," Mary says with a laugh. "Very much so. And my boys turned out all right, didn't they?"

"Yes, they have," Castiel says. "You did an excellent job."

"Can't take all the credit for that one either," Mary says cheerfully. "It takes a village—"

She's cut off at the sound of the front door opening and closing. It's Dean, who comes around the corner to the kitchen and freezes when he sees the two of them.

"Heeeey." Dean glances warily between Castiel and Mary. Castiel thinks it's an odd reaction from him, until Dean adds, "Please tell me this isn't embarrassing childhood story time?"

"Aww honey," Mary says, "don't you want Cas to know about that time you decided that you wanted to be Tarzan?"

"Ha haha, good one, Mom!" Dean drops a kiss on the top of Castiel's head as he walks past to the fridge. "I'm totally still cool, right, Cas?"

"Always," Castiel says.

“I’m just teasing,” Mary says. “You know I like to wait until your brother is around for that.”

“Mom’s a riot, isn’t she?” Dean says. “What’re you guys having? Is that hot cocoa? Did you save some for me?”

“Yes and yes,” Mary says, “but now you must tell us where you’ve been.”

“I was checking in with Jo. Gotta do it from the tower, you know how it is.”

Dean regales them with the latest updates from the capital as he collects his hot cocoa and joins them at the island. Castiel’s pleased that things are going well, with Hannah and her movement making the appropriate noise and John holding his ground while Naomi has yet to figure out the extent of what they’ve done. She will know soon, or at least Ellen will once the notary files their divorce and the systems get updated, and Naomi will know soon after. According to Calliope it usually takes a few days for new filings to show up, but with their marriage being a matter of the state, the news will surely hit the capital by tomorrow afternoon at the latest.

“Jo isn’t upset you still can’t tell her everything?” Castiel asks.

“Nah, she’s a good bean,” Dean says. “I’ll make it up to her. Oh by the way, word on the street is that we’re trying to flee the country.”

“Naomi raising a stink about that?” Mary says.

Dean shakes his head. “Not yet, according to Jo.”

“She won’t make a move unless she knows for certain what we’re up to,” Castiel says. “It won’t do for us to embarrass her.”

Dean nods, looking pleased as punch. “I’ve always wanted to know what it feels like to be part of a conspiracy.”

Castiel raises an eyebrow. “You were party to the fiction of our marriage.”

“That...” Dean makes a whine-whistle sound. “That was more like being sucked *into* it than being part of it. Doesn’t really count.”

“Which reminds me,” Mary says. “I’ve been very curious about the non-fiction part of your marriage.”

Dean makes a sputtering sound, while Castiel inclines his head towards her and asks, “Which part?”

“Oh, you know...” Mary smiles. “How you two—”

“They’re back!” Dean announces, so loudly that he almost drowns out the sound of the house gate being opened. “We should... we should find out whether they got everything done okay and all... that.”

Mary just smiles. “Of course, honey.”

Anna, Calliope and Sam return as one party to share the news that the divorce was successfully filed, but only after some aggressive persuasion.

“He wouldn’t do it at first,” Anna says, flushed and excited in her success, “because it was, and I quote, ‘too big a case for the county office’. He wouldn’t even look at the evidence dossier and kept trying to give us the run around to another district office but Calliope, wow, she wore him down.”

“Thanks to an assist from Sam,” Calliope says.

With everyone gathered in the Winchester kitchen at once, the place almost seems too small, but Castiel knows that’s only in his mind. There’s definitely space for all, though less so on there being enough hot cocoa for all, which necessitates Dean making another batch for the newly returned.

“Why were you even *there*?” Dean asks Sam. “Aren’t you on a grocery run?”

Sam shrugs. “Saw Anna’s car outside the council house on the way back. They should’ve been long done by the time I got back so... I went to see what’s up.”

“And save the day,” Anna adds. “Which was awesome.”

“Oh,” Sam says bashfully, “no, I was... they did all the work. I just made the whole case more ‘real’ to him – it’s that new guy, Elliot, if you remember him – by being, you know, *that* Sam Winchester.”

Dean gives him a knowing look. “Baby brother Sam Winchester or former Lucifer-minion Sam Winchester?”

“Bit of both,” Sam admits.

“High fives all ‘round.” Dean raises a hand, which Sam dutifully taps. “Any other problems?”

“On the contrary,” Calliope says. “Once he agreed to a cursory look of the dossier, his reaction was most promising. The photographs of your damaged bindings were enough for the filing, but the supplementary materials that prove ill faith on Michael’s part was... Well, Naomi will have her work cut out for her.”

“So will we,” Castiel says.

“There was no non-disclosure clause in your agreement,” Calliope reminds him. “Any threat you face now will be on your own terms. Congratulations on your freedom, gentlemen, and if you’ll excuse me, I need to work on your statement.”

“Thank you, Calliope,” Mary says. “We’ll get you back to the city soon.”

Calliope waves a hand as she departs the room, her stride confident enough that Castiel assumes the Winchesters must have set her up in a guest room somewhere. That leaves the rest of them, Mary clapping her hands together with satisfaction, Dean throwing an arm around Sam and shaking him, and Anna dropping into the chair next to Castiel to pull him into a hug.

“How are you feeling?” Anna asks quietly.

“Grateful,” Castiel says.

“Okay, that’s not what I was expecting.” Anna says that in mock seriousness, but her smile is too bright. “There’s no way Naomi can spin this one. No *way*. You’re out. Don’t worry, it takes ages to really sink in.”

“That makes sense,” Castiel says. “I suppose I’m technically stateless now?”

“You’re under formal protection of the Winchester House until such time as your new papers can be filed,” Mary says, raising her mug of refilled cocoa in a toast. “The Campbell House will back you on it, too.”

“Pfft,” Dean says. “Sorry, Mom, but... really?”

“Your grandfather owes me a huge one,” Mary says. “And if you play your cards right, it’ll be in their interest to put their weight behind your cause.”

“You mean, because they have to make up for all that other bullshit?” Dean says wryly.

“Accurate,” Mary says. “I’m not asking you to trust them, Dean. I’m just pointing out that you can trust their tendency to be predictable when the wind changes.”

Dean considers that. “I guess. Oh yeah, by the way me and Cas have been working on our herald.”

Sam snickers. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

Dean scowls. “Our *family* herald, smartass. We can’t get married again yet, but I asked Cas if we could get matching ink. Like, mundane ink. We were thinking we could reference our heraldic device, but we haven’t actually *decided* on our device yet. Do we still have that family book lying around? Could be good for ideas.”

“I do like the look of your impala,” Castiel says.

“That is such a great idea,” Anna says. “Cas, you can get those wings you’ve always wanted.”

“Wings are awesome,” Dean says. “Though they’re gonna be... Mom are you *crying*?”

Castiel looks at Mary, whose eyes are shining once again. She says, almost lightly, “No, I’m not. All right, just a little. I’m your mother, I’m allowed to be emotional about these things.”

“About what, wings?” Dean says it as a joke, but he moves across the room to his mother’s side, where he lets Mary take his hand and pat it indulgently. “It’s just ink, Mom.”

“I know,” Mary says. “You can always get each other’s initials to start with and build on from there.”

“That’s an idea, too,” Dean says. “Cas?”

Castiel smiles at him. “I’d like that.”

He can imagine it easily: a mundane tattoo of Dean’s initials somewhere... along his ribs, maybe. So whenever he’s in doubt, or nervous, or simply feeling lost, he could press his hand there and partake of its non-magical properties. Dean will have a mirror of that on himself somewhere of his own choosing, and if that is all the mark Castiel leaves in the world, he will be content.

Castiel understood what Mary meant what she said that he and Dean were married in a non-corporeal, beyond-legal way, but now he’s seeing clearly how that will make the next two years surmountable, nigh irrelevant. Castiel can be slow on the pick-up but hey, he’s relatively new to these kinds of emotional adventures. He will be fine, he knows now. They will be fine.

A soft tap at the side of Castiel’s head jolts him out from his thoughts. Anna’s gentle headbutt was apparently necessary because he and Dean have been smiling at each other for some time.

“So...” Sam drawls, “are you guys gonna go and ‘work on your heralds’ now?”

“Hey,” Dean says, “Mom’s right here.”

“You will tell me someday, right?” Mary says hopefully. “How you – how the two of you... found each other?”

“You didn’t tell Mom how you really met?” Sam exclaims. “I get not telling me, but Mom?”

“Mary,” Castiel says, “I’m sure you know the details. We discussed it the night where... when Naomi’s contingency plan came into play.”

“After Sasquatch here booked it,” Dean says, smacking Sam lightly on the shoulder.

“I’m quite certain that was an abridged version,” Mary says. “And both of you weren’t on good terms on the time of the telling.”

“Hey,” Sam says, poking his brother in the arm. “If Benny knows, we gotta know. I don’t make the rules.”

Anna scoffs. “Oh please. When I found Cas, he refused to tell me anything about Dean for *weeks*. I had no clue he was dealing with a broken heart the whole time because he is just—” she jabs Castiel’s side playfully, “*that* communicative.”

Dean stares at Cas, surprised. “You were doing the whole suffering in silence thing?”

“I’d never been in love before,” Castiel says. “I didn’t know what to do. And I tend to get really angry or really quiet when I don’t know what to do.”

“Yeah...” Dean nods slowly. “You were kinda sorta like that the night we, uh... The night we met.”

“Oh my God,” Sam says. “You picked Cas up, didn’t you?”

Dean jabs an accusing finger in the air at his brother. “It wasn’t like that.”

“It was mostly like that,” Castiel says, which has Dean sputtering. “But not *entirely* like that. I was the one who was there at Benny’s bar to pick someone up and Dean was... Well. Dean didn’t know a thing about me, but I think he sensed that there was something weighty to my seemingly frivolous actions of searching for a casual partner for the night.”

Anna squeezes Castiel’s arm. “Why were you doing that?”

“I was scared,” Castiel says. “Mostly angry but also scared, at having come to a country I didn’t know to marry someone I knew even less. That night was to be my last... Anyway. What I *really* needed that night – though I didn’t know it at the time – was kindness. And he, as we all know, has that in abundance. Thank you, Dean.”

Dean coughs, flustered, and fails to drag his hand away from where Mary is still clasping it. “It’s stupid,” he mutters. “It’s not like – it doesn’t – it’s not the kind of story you usually get when people talk about how they met the love of their lives, all right?”

Castiel makes a face. “I was engaged to your brother.”

Dean inclines his head. “Okay, there’s that.”

“And you only got finagled into marrying Cas when Sam ran away,” Anna points out. “Technically, that makes you the spare.”

“Plus the whole thing was a concocted scheme to incite a national catastrophe,” Mary says.

Dean scowls. “Keep raining on my parade, guys.”

“No, Dean,” Castiel says, “the point is that *in spite* all of that ridiculousness, you found the love of your life.”

Dean makes a face as though to be offended, but it doesn’t last long, not when he seems bursting at the seams with other emotions. Castiel sees satisfaction, pleasure, bashfulness, and many more dancing in his verdant eyes. Then Dean licks his lips, and Castiel knows he’s about to say something smart alec-y, but then he shakes his head and shrugs.

“Yeah,” Dean says. “Guess I did.”

Castiel nods. “And that’s how we met. Any other questions? And would it be impolite to also ask if there are plans for dinner?”

“I have a few more questions,” Mary says, “but I am also thinking about dinner, so I could voice them to you as I’m preparing it?”

“You’re not cooking, Mom,” Dean protests.

Mary hushes him. “You got divorced today, so I’m cooking. Sam?”

Sam straightens. “I... forgot to unload the car, I’ll be right back.” Dean and Anna laugh when he flees the room, but Dean trails after him, saluting a little as he goes off to provide a helping hand.

“May I help you?” Castiel asks.

“Cooking?” Anna says. “You?”

“I’d like to learn,” Castiel insists.

“Of course.” Mary is smiling when she stands up, and as she turns away to look at the kitchen counter, her hand comes up – almost subconsciously – to brush Castiel’s cheek before moving away. Castiel beams, and keeps beaming when Anna shakes her head and laughs softly at him.

Chapter 6

In a sense, getting divorced was the easy part, because all Castiel and Dean needed to accomplish that were a cleric, a lawyer, witnesses, and each other. Sure, there was a mild challenge in convincing a notary to sign it off, but relative to its consequences, the divorce was easy to perform.

This, however, is different.

Today Castiel is far more tense. Dean doesn't seem to be faring much better either, tapping his knee and staring out the car window, not that their view of the alley has changed in the past.... half hour? Hour? It's hard to tell.

"Would it help if I turned on the radio?" Castiel asks.

"I kinda want to keep my headspace." Dean's tone is clipped, but understandably so. "Ugh, I hate having to just wait."

Castiel nods in agreement. It *is* best that he and Dean stay out of the way while their slightly-less-famous friends and family members get things done, but knowing that doesn't make it less frustrating.

It's only yesterday that Calliope broke their binding, but it feels like so much more time has passed since then. Most of that feeling can be attributed to how he, Dean, Sam, Anna and Mary stayed up late last night talking – about life, the current situation, and the events that went down during the conflict that each of them had only known about in parts. Castiel and Dean's explanation of how they met was just the start of it; then came Sam's telling of his indoctrination and escape from Lucifer's party, Mary's work with the other Houses, Anna's networking all the way to the kingdom, and so on so forth. The energy of that discussion carried through to today, to the execution of the next portion of their plan.

"Am I sweating?" Castiel lifts up his arms to check. "I don't want to have to change."

"You look fine. Just a little..." Dean reaches over and smoothens Castiel's collar. "Yeah, you're okay."

"I should be wearing a tie."

"No, this is more approachable. Actually, you should open the top button there."

"Is that a flirtation?"

Dean makes an offended sound. "For your information, I think you look way hotter *with* a tie, but it's not about looking hot today. Just open it, trust me."

Castiel sighs and looks down at his dress shirt – actually it's Dean's shirt, which explains why it's a little loose around the shoulders – and undoes the topmost button. He'd noticed

that Dean's already done the same with his, but he hadn't thought it had anything to do with approachability. Castiel thinks he would feel more comfortable if he had a jacket to go with the shirt.

"You like it when I wear ties?" Castiel asks.

Dean raises his eyebrows. "Is *that* a flirtation?"

"I'm nervous, I'm trying to distract myself."

"You weren't nervous the first time we did this."

"How is it useful to bring that up now? I didn't care about the stakes the first time."

Dean grins. "I'm just teasing."

"I know."

"Yes, Cas, I think you look awesome with ties," Dean says. "Even when you don't fix 'em quite right."

Castiel nods. "That's important information."

At long last, Dean's walkie-talkie crackles to life. Sam's voice comes through: "*We're good. Come on in.*"

"Roger that." Dean starts the car. "Rock and roll."

Their car is parked between buildings, and they now roll out into one of the town's main roads. It's funny that their final destination is only a handful of blocks away, but Castiel concedes to the others' expertise that they stay away until *just* before they're needed.

If this were any other occasion, Dean would be showing Castiel the sights of his hometown, but for now he is silent and focused. Still, Castiel can't help but study the buildings as they pass, wondering which ones are Dean's regular establishments. Castiel spots a grocery store, a bar, a clinic, and then Dean's pulling up to the local television station, marked by the large antennae on its roof.

There are a number of vehicles parked around the building, but there's one clear spot, and Sam standing there waving at them to take it. As soon as they're out of the car, Sam ushers them into the building as he rattles off the latest updates: they need to be in the studio for the final prep, Charlie's almost ready, and Mary and Calliope have the mayor's office covered. As they move through doorways and around cubicles, Castiel notices that Sam's done his work well; everyone who sees them pass merely nods in acknowledgement, and Castiel nods back, grateful.

"What about Hannah?" Castiel says. "Did you manage to make contact?"

"Yep," Sam says. "Got her, she's waiting for you."

They head up a flight of stairs and arrive at what appears to be Charlie's workstation, in that it is a workstation that has been commandeered by Charlie for today's purpose. The familiar electronic equipment and wiring actually has Castiel exhaling in relief.

"Hi, hi, hi." Charlie flutters her fingers in the air, though her eyes focused on the radio terminal. "You guys look great, congrats on the divorce, kiss kiss."

Dean frowns. "You're running on *how* many cups of coffee now?"

"Do you think setting this up is easy, Dean?" Charlie fires back. "Huh, do you?"

"Uh, you said it was enough time—" Dean says.

"It's fixed up," Sam says firmly. "Charlie and the others did an excellent job. The other teams are connected, we have Maggie and Winston on the wire, it's ready to go."

"*Almost* ready to go," Charlie says. "Dean, briefing. Castiel, call." She gestures at the desk, where a radio is waiting.

"Ah, yes." Castiel exchanges a look with Dean, who nods encouragingly. Castiel takes a breath and raises the device to his year. "Hello? Hannah?"

"Yes," Hannah says, her voice clear and crisp. "*Gamma team is at Council Square, as promised. Myself and a few others are holding the line. Everyone is in good spirits, and no one has been arrested.*"

"While I'm glad of that, you sound awfully smug about it," Castiel says.

"*I did tell you that we could handle it. I think they suspected we were a distraction even before the news hit.*"

Castiel exhales. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you what Dean and I were planning."

"*Don't apologize. It's better that we didn't know. Less chance of it getting out before you were ready, after all.*"

Castiel wants to ask how the Republic capital has taken the news, but any satisfying answer would take too long. Despite his curiosity Castiel returns to the task at hand and says, "This part I can tell you. Do you have paper to write on?" When Hannah affirms this, Castiel reads a series of numbers off the small placard on the desk. "This is a television frequency. Share it with as many as possible and tune in if you can, though we don't know when or how long we can keep up the transmission."

There's a pause as Hannah processes this. "*What are you going to do?*"

"We're making a statement," Castiel says. "There must already be speculation about what our divorce means, and this is the fastest way to speak up on our part before Naomi can react meaningfully."

"*By hijacking a television frequency?*"

“If this goes badly, follow the exit plan.”

“She must know where you are by now.” Hannah says. *“Her people can get there in a few hours, if they haven’t left the city already.”*

“Please worry about yourself and those I have placed in your care,” Castiel says. “I must go.”

“Yes, of course, my apologies,” Hannah says. *“Good luck.”*

“Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

As soon as Castiel returns the receiver to its place Charlie waves him to another room, where an animated conversation is taking place. Dean seems to be talking over everyone else, his voice loud as he says, “I’m just saying, I’ve been doing this for months, I know my shit.”

“That’s different, and you know it,” comes a female voice. “You didn’t have a camera on you, it’s...” The argument fades as Castiel enters.

Of the group, Sam appears to be the most frustrated, almost bouncing on his toes in what Castiel assumes must be a desire to get things moving. In comparison, Dean has the stance of statue, arms crossed in the face of Pamela’s nonplussed expression, while Chuck has somehow managed to squeeze himself in a corner, frantically flipping through a notebook. There are two more people here who are unfamiliar to Castiel, though before he can ask who they are Pamela’s stepping forward, taking a firm grip of his shoulders and pressing her cheek briefly to his.

“Hello there, handsome,” Pamela says. “Sight for sore eyes.”

“He’s taken, Pam,” Dean says.

“That’s not what I heard,” Pamela responds, which has Dean snorting faintly.

Castiel turns to the remaining two and smiles politely. “Hello.”

“Oh yeah,” Sam says, shaking himself. “This is Penny and Wayne, they’re in charge of this station. They’ve been awesome about letting us come in here and use their facilities.”

“Sounds so much nicer than ‘hijacking’, am I right?” Dean says.

“Thank you,” Castiel says as he shakes Penny and Wayne’s hands in turn. “This means so much.”

“We’re glad to help,” Penny says. “It’s the least we can do.”

Wayne chuckles. “I always knew the Winchesters would one day make waves again.”

“Ha,” Dean says. “I’ll tell Dad you said that.”

“There seemed to be an argument before I came in,” Castiel says. “Was there a problem?”

Pamela sighs. “Ah, yes. Dean’s trying to put the ix-nay on make-up. Vanity is well and fine, but my professional opinion is: if you went through the trouble of getting the band back together, you need to go all the way to its natural conclusion.”

“No, we don’t,” Dean says. “That’s the point. *This* is not like those other times, it’s not a... what’d you call it, Cas? A pageant. It’s not a pageant.”

“Make-up is as crucial as the cameras and lighting,” Pamela says.

Chuck sighs loudly, clearly exhausted. “If we have to argue, can’t we argue about the content? I have only the vaguest idea of how to lead in, you guys.”

“Can I help?” Castiel asks.

“No, wait, we gotta settle this make-up thing,” Dean says. “They gotta know what they’re working with before they finish setting up the lights.”

“Lighting is important,” Wayne said.

“Look, Dean,” Sam says in exasperation, “they’re the experts. We asked them to come here for a reason.”

“Just a little bit of make-up,” Castiel says.

“What?” Dean says. “Cas!”

“We’re already wearing dress shirts,” Castiel points out. “If we wanted casual, we would’ve done this in jeans and band shirts, but we didn’t. So we might as well complete the look. Be presentable, be taken seriously. I’m not as... we’re not as polished as we were months ago.”

“Hey, I shaved,” Dean says. “Ugh, fine! Just a *little* make-up.”

“Thank you,” Pamela says. “Now let’s get you sorted.”

This whole telecast idea came from Anna; she brought it up a few days ago in conjunction with Castiel’s suggestion of breaking the binding. Sadly, she’s not with them at the television station to see it play out. Someone has to stay at the town limits and keep an eye out for possible arrivals from the capital, so that’s where she is while Castiel and Dean get miked up for their post-divorce television debut.

Anna may not be physically here, but she’s in Castiel’s thoughts while Pamela powders his nose and adjusts the product in his hair. Anna hadn’t approved of the whole media circus surrounding Dean and Castiel’s wedding – to be fair, there was little about the agreement that she approved of *at all* – but it made sense that she’d be the first to point out the advantage of turning that around on those who’d set it up.

“Naomi gave you this advantage in the first place,” Anna said. “Own it.”

It’s not just the television interviews of yesterday that lead up to this. There’s Dean’s pirate radio station and Castiel’s semi-public talks with his people, and before that, there was Castiel’s teaching career, and Dean’s hunter leadership experience. Basically, there are many things in the course of their lives that make this next step almost a natural extension of everything they’ve done thus far.

The technical portion is beyond Castiel’s understanding. All he knows is that Dean, Anna and Charlie have utilized all sorts of resources in their networks to make this broadcast happen, and get it relayed across the Republic. Dean’s radio station is playing a part as well, in disseminating the TV frequency they’re repurposing for this exercise.

Castiel knows that this is an audacious move. There are procedures for setting up press conferences, and they’re bypassing a whole bunch of them this way. Though when Castiel pointed that out, Dean retorted that it’s not like they had government approval to disobey Michael’s orders, whoop Lucifer’s ass, or get divorced, so they’re really just doing what they know best. Castiel conceded to the wisdom of Dean’s argument.

“Would it be in poor taste to ask you to smile?” Pamela asks.

Castiel looks down at her. “Dean’s better at smiling.”

Pamela huffs a laugh. “Fair enough. Okay, you’re done. Let’s get on set.”

The studio they’re using is only a little bit smaller than the one they’d had for their first interview. There are two cameras, plus various lights and sound equipment, all of which are being manned by the small but efficient local team – who seem excited to just be involved today, judging from the way a few of them send Castiel enthusiastic thumbs-up. There are no banners or flags, but there is a settee placed at an angle to the interviewer’s chair. Chuck’s in that chair, frantically going through notes while Dean perches on the chair’s arm and makes comments.

“How are things?” Castiel asks. “Chuck, are you all right?”

“I’ll figure it out.” Chuck sighs. “How long before we start?”

“Not long enough,” Pamela says, clicking her fingers for Chuck to stand up. “We’re going to see you, too. Let’s touch up.”

Dean joins Castiel at the settee, taking the space to Castiel’s right. “How you feeling?”

“I’m ready, though still somewhat nervous.” Castiel takes a deep breath. “I know we’d talked about this already but I can’t help but think about how much you’re giving up by doing this.”

“Me?” Dean says, surprised. “Is this about the oversharing thing?”

“You value your privacy,” Castiel says. “We have to assume that everyone will watch this, and that includes your friends, extended family, co-workers...”

Dean laughs and shakes his head. “Like it’s all that different for you? You’re free now, Cas. You have a head start on Naomi and could go anywhere in the world if you wanted. You don’t *have* to be here, doing this.”

“That’s not an option.”

“Sure it is.” Dean’s smiling as he leans to kiss Castiel. “You only refuse to think it is.”

Doing this may not be sensible, but it still makes sense. Considering how little of Castiel’s life has made sense in recent times – and in bad ways – he should do what he can to preserve this state. It could go badly, but isn’t it worth taking the risk? Especially when the pay-off is as momentous as being able to sit close at Dean’s side just like Castiel’s doing right now, their thighs brushing as they make themselves comfortable on the settee.

“All right,” Chuck says. His shirt and hair have been straightened, and sensible glasses are perched on his nose. “Okay then.”

Pamela puts a hand to her earpiece and steps back, behind the cameras. “How’s it looking from the control booth, guys?” She nods and starts going through the check-in with all the crewmembers, one after another. Dean takes a deep breath, and Castiel counts silently back from ten.

From a corner of the room, Sam opens his mouth in an exaggerated smile, and gives them a thumbs-up.

As far as Castiel’s concerned, this could be his last public act of his lifetime. Not that he’s particularly fond of speaking in public, but this is the first and last chance he and Dean have had to set the record straight, after so long of both of them toeing a line neither of them cared for.

Chuck opens the interview, though unlike their previous sessions, the pleasantries are brief. There’s no small talk, no praise of small things that no one cares about. He introduces himself, and then Dean and Castiel, and then leads in:

“So the hot news today is about you two. Do you want to elaborate on that?”

“Yes,” Castiel says. “Yesterday Dean and I, by mutual agreement, broke our marriage binding. It has been filed, and by now I think has come out into the open.”

“Indeed, it has,” Chuck says. “The obvious question would be: why? Why would you do this?”

“There are many reasons,” Castiel says. “But I think it would be explained best if we start at the beginning.”

“And we mean *way* in the beginning,” Dean says, with a laugh. “How much time you got?”

“Okay,” Chuck says, “maybe we should backtrack a little. Are you both... how are things with you?”

“We’re good.” Dean exchanges a look with Castiel, who smiles. “We’ve been through a lot, but made tougher for it. Just because we’re not married anymore doesn’t change the way I feel for this guy.”

Castiel nods. “That’s true for me as well. I love Dean, and fully intend to love him for the rest of my life. But we’ve reached a point where our marriage wasn’t reflecting what we wanted from each other, and that’s why we had to end it.”

“Yes,” Chuck says, “so let’s start on that now. I believe you said it goes back to the beginning. Do you mean your youthful romance?”

He and Dean have rehearsed this part, or at least, rehearsed who has to elaborate on which segments. Their confession to Mary and the others last night made them realize how important this part of their narrative is, and how necessary it is to address that before anything else.

“Actually, that’s the crux of why we’re here,” Castiel says. “And why we had to break the binding. Um...”

“This is hard for both of us,” Dean says. “We wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t have the support of so many people. Me and Cas, we know we’re luckier than most through the conflict, and we know a lot of that luck comes from people believing in us, in – in our story, I guess you can call it. So what we’re here to tell you is a betrayal of that.”

“We’re sorry,” Castiel says. “That doesn’t excuse our complicity, but we’re sorry.”

“We – me and Cas – we never met as teenagers.” Dean pauses, letting that sink in. “That was made up.”

Chuck knows this already, but he moves forward in his seat, acting as the audience surrogate in being intrigued. “Made up? What does that mean?”

“It’s a lie,” Dean says. “A fib. Untrue.”

“When the agreement was originally proposed,” Castiel says, “both sides were to nominate the persons who would be wed in sealing the terms. I believe this was common knowledge, but just to repeat – His Royal Highness King Michael chose me, a distant cousin, to be his representative. Here in the Republic, after some debate in the Council, they chose Sam Winchester.”

“My brother,” Dean says. “Just in case anyone’s confused.”

A few more prompts from Chuck and they lay it out: Castiel travelled here to meet his groom, and the fiction that was presented to the public was that Sam stepped out of the way to let Dean marry him for love. But that was a cover-up of the fact that Sam Winchester fled

the scene before the wedding, and they had to scramble to find a replacement to salvage the agreement.

“That is incredible,” Chuck says. “Your romance – the reunion to defeat all reunions – none of that actually happened?”

“No,” Dean says. “Me and Cas were practically strangers when we got hitched.”

“Why did you go through with it?” Chuck asks. “How does one – well, two of you – go along with such a huge lie?”

“There is context to take into account,” Castiel says. “The stakes were the same, whether I was married to Dean, or to Sam. We were chosen for a role upon which rested the fates of our nations. Both of us are... *were* unimportant politically, so even if we wanted to protest, what could we do? We’d agreed to the marriage, so there was a great deal of pressure to go along with a lie on top of that.”

“Plus you gotta remember,” Dean says, “Michael wasn’t acting in good faith, like at all. He was stacking the chips to make his agenda happen, and we know what that was now, right? I know a lot’s changed since then, but there was no way to cross him at the time. And what for? We had this huge responsibility put on our heads, and were told pretty much that if the agreement failed, it would be our fault. Cas is just a teacher for crying out loud, and he lives – lived – at the mercy of the king.”

“And Dean was protecting his brother. It’s known now, but at the time it was very controversial that Sam had abandoned his obligation to the marriage.”

Chuck nods. “Yes, that does sound like quite a pickle. But the backdrop has changed a lot since you first took your vows. I understand sticking to those obligations when the agreement was still freshly signed, but once His Highness made his move, wouldn’t that have changed everything? Dean, I believe that during the weeks of the conflict, you took up a private radio frequency to share information every night.”

“Yes, I did,” Dean says. “I was the Handyman.”

Chuck smiles. “I was one of your listeners. For our viewers who are unaware – Dean was involved in the broadcast of a pirate radio station during the communication blackout that lasted several weeks. He used the nickname the ‘Handyman’, and would every night share information on the latest conflict updates, safe travel routes, protection tips, and other things. At one point he started talking about an Emmanuel, a person whom he said he had unfinished business with and there was a certain... overtone in those mentions.”

Dean bobs his head sheepishly. “Emmanuel is Cas. One of the many reasons I took up that station was to make contact with him. We got separated like, literally the day after Michael arrived at Ilchester, and I hadn’t heard from him in weeks. I wanted to get it out there that I was looking for him.”

“Why do that?” Chuck says. “Why keep up the fiction that you were in love, and married for love?”

Dean opens his mouth to answer but gapes for a moment, unable to answer. It isn't an act, so Castiel puts his hand on his, which brings Dean back to the present enough to say, "We didn't marry for – for love, but we – I – definitely had feelings for Cas by then. I mean, by the time Michael popped by."

"Which were reciprocated," Castiel says.

Chuck hold up a hand. "Wait, are you saying that you guys... You fell in love along the way?"

"Yes," Castiel says. "Though of course we understand how implausible that sounds. If I heard anyone else describe this sequence of events I doubt I'd believe it either. But it is the truth."

Dean clears his throat. "See, if you had like two stories – one where we're young sweethearts pining for each other for years and years, and another where we'd fallen for each other in the span of a few weeks, it's easier to believe in the first one, right? So even after the whole thing with Michael happened and we didn't need to 'perform'—" he says with finger quotes, "— we fell back on that first untrue story just 'cause it was easier than having to explain the truth."

"That doesn't excuse the fact we lied," Castiel says. "We're sorry for all the hurt that we've caused."

"It will be a huge shock to many," Chuck agrees. "Practically the whole nation was rooting for the two of you. What is everyone to make of all the pictures, the appearances, the things you've said about each other?"

Castiel feels his face pinch. "If it's confusing to outsiders, I can assure you that it's confusing to us as well. We were told to pretend, and along the way real feelings came in, and it's... Sometimes I look back on pictures of our time in Ilchester and even I don't know where we stood. I'd grown attached to Dean by then, but I didn't – there was always the deception hanging over our heads. I resented that role, and I hated what it asked of me but... I was also thankful to it because it brought Dean into my life."

"It's complicated," Dean says.

"There was already attraction between us before we walked into the temple to take the binding," Castiel glances at Dean, who nods at him to continue. "It was just a simple attraction – chemistry, I think, people call it. And I think some of that bled into our performance as a loving, married couple. There was more of that bleeding when we honestly grew more attached to each other."

"Very complicated," Dean says.

"See," Castiel says, "we don't expect everyone to believe us, or to forgive us. If we lied then, who's to say we aren't lying now? There's no way for anyone to be sure, is there? We accept that. What's important to us right now is to be honest about what happened. Whatever anyone wants to take from that is up to them."

“It was getting us down,” Dean says. “It comes back to why we broke the binding. We want to put all of that behind us.”

Chuck makes a thoughtful sound. “So the lies are intertwined with the marriage, is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, it is,” Castiel says, at the same time that Dean goes, “Yeah, but it’s also – Cas, what about the...”

“Oh, right,” Castiel says. “Actually our binding was already compromised before we broke it entirely. There were some... high-pressure incidents during the conflict where I damaged the tattoo.”

“*We*,” Dean says. “We damaged the tattoo. Not together, though – separate incidents, separate damage.”

Chuck nods, sympathetic. “Would you like to share more about that?”

“It ties to Michael’s trial,” Castiel says, “so I think it’s best not to go into that here. Suffice to say that there was enough breakage in the tattoo that we were unsure how legally binding it was.”

“So it’s like,” Dean says, “we didn’t even know how married we were? And we found ourselves at a crossroad between renewing the binding fully or, well, ending it. We chose the second, because it feels better to, uh...”

“Start anew,” Castiel says. “We don’t think we can fulfil the terms of the old agreement. Not anymore.”

“It’s selfish,” Dean sheepishly. “We know that.”

“But why now?” Chuck asks. “Why come clean about this now?”

“We owe it to people,” Dean says. “The marriage was never just about us, or even about the agreement. I mean, yeah, it *is* about those things, but it was also this huge collective movement across our countries. We weren’t gunning for it, but people trusted us because of this – this reputation we’d built by accident, and they deserve to know the truth now that we’ve ended it.”

“Not just that,” Castiel says. “We – me and Dean – we want to move on. With the situation in our nations being much improved recently, we believe that it’s time to close that chapter of our lives and, well... get some practice being together before we can be legally wed again.”

“Ah,” Chuck says, “so that is in the books for you two?”

“Cas proposed,” Dean says, with such glee that Castiel’s face grows warm. “I said yes, obviously. Don’t mind waiting for two years, either.”

“Two years?” Chuck asks.

“It’s part of the contract,” Dean says. “Since we broke the binding, there’s a two-year grace period of the closing before we can, uh...”

“Renew a legal relationship,” Castiel says. “It’s a standard termination clause for these kinds of arrangements. It’s meant to discourage either party from using their political influence to enter another contract that could jeopardize the first one. That kind of thing happened a lot in the kingdom, unfortunately.”

That’s the worst of it done, though Castiel doesn’t relax too much with the cameras still rolling. Chuck steers the conversation towards the conflict, asking about what happened with Michael and Lucifer. This is a subject Castiel and Dean have already shared with other people and have no problem doing again here, but since it would take too long to tell everything, they briefly touch the highlights: the early uncertainty they had of Michael’s intentions, fleeing the scene of Ilchester, and engaging Lucifer in Rexford.

“It was a lot of work, with a pinch of luck,” Dean says. “Plus, geez, how can I forget – it’s also countless people chipping in when they didn’t have to. I got to talk to a lot of, uh, regular folk when I was doing the radio show, mostly to find out what’s happening, what people wanted updates on, that sort of thing. I meet a lot of people in my line of work anyway, but in a crisis situation this big, you get to see what people are really made of, and... I guess I’m really proud of what I saw.”

“Yes,” Castiel says, “I do believe that the conflict would’ve dragged on much longer if so many hadn’t come together the way they did. To see such resilience and dedication up close, is very humbling, and, well, made reconsider some of my own views of life.”

“Hah,” Dean scoffs. “You say that like you’re a cynical bastard, but you’re not, you know. You’re always trying to see the best in people.”

“Hopefulness doesn’t necessarily cancel out cynicism,” Castiel says. “Though it probably helps that I have had a significant drop of disappointments in my life recently.”

Dean nudges Castiel’s arm. “Just doing my job.”

Chuck smiles, and his eyes are warm behind his glasses. “So are there any regrets, or things you wish you’d done differently?”

It’s a question that Castiel’s asked himself many times and knows the answer to, but he hesitates now, unsure how to word himself for an audience. Dean answers first, saying: “Yeah, there are a couple of things I wish I’d done differently and I... okay, I spent a couple of weeks beating myself up over that—” Castiel looks over at him sharply, “—but I’m done with that, I don’t think there’s any point thinking about it anymore. I’ve got too much to be thankful for now.”

“And you, Castiel?” Chuck prompts.

Castiel turns his attention back to Chuck. “Yes, I have regrets. I wish I’d had less of an ego to start with, and I wish I’d paid attention more. I think there might have been less damage as a whole if I’d seen what was going on.”

“You know that’s still your ego talking,” Dean says. “Thinking that you could’ve prevented it.”

Castiel squints. “Please don’t talk to me about improper claiming of responsibility.”

Dean shrugs. “I’m just saying.”

“And I’m *not* saying that I blame myself for the choices of others,” Castiel says. “I’m saying that absolutely anyone can make a difference even if they think they can’t – you must agree with that, don’t you, Dean? I thought I was insignificant, but I believed in that insignificance so strongly that I couldn’t conceive of acting or even thinking beyond my station. I had to unlearn that.”

“So, what,” Dean says, “you regret not being then who you are now? You regret not having a time machine?”

“Well, to be honest,” Castiel responds wryly, “my answer is not that far from yours, in that I cannot bring myself to regret anything I’ve done since it’s brought me to where I am today, but I thought I’d avoid the repetition by exploring another angle, and encourage anyone who’s watching this to learn something from my mistakes.” He tilts his head. “Though a time machine might be nice as well.”

Chuck laughs. “That actually comes right to what I was going to ask next. Is there anything else you’d like to tell the viewers?”

Castiel has been keeping eye contact with Chuck for the most part, but at this he immediately looks at the camera. Well, he looks at Camera B, because that’s the one almost right behind Chuck’s shoulder. He imagines the many eyes behind that shiny black surface – Hannah, Nora, Victor, Bobby, Benny, Rachel – and for a moment is struck dumb by the inadequacy of this platform.

“I guess...” Dean starts, “I wanna say that we’re not talking here today because we want to convince everyone that we went along with the lies because we had pure intentions or anything like that. It’s just...”

“There’s been enough lies,” Castiel says. “We’re done with that, and we wanted to tell the truth.”

Dean nods. “Yeah. We could’ve just gone away, you know, waited for all of it to blow over but... this felt more right. Of course, like we said, we don’t expect anybody to buy any of this, it’s just... we had to say it. That’s all.”

Chuck smiles. “Thank you. I think that’s enough for today.”

Pamela claps once, with both hands above her head. “That’s a wrap, let’s check it!”

Castiel stands up slowly, exhaling. He thought he’d had a good handle on his nerves, but his body is surprisingly tense, necessitating careful stretches of his arms and legs. Faint nudging at his side draws his attention down, where Dean is still sitting but is making grabby hands at him.

“What?” Castiel says.

“Come on, come on,” Dean says. He only quiets when Castiel takes a side step closer to him, allowing Dean to wrap both arms around Castiel’s legs and lean his forehead against Castiel’s hip. “Blergh.”

“You did really well, Dean.” Castiel pats the top of Dean’s head gently.

“Argh,” Dean says.

“Great job, guys!” Sam exclaims, bounding forward. “Clear and concise, sympathetic, self-aware, all those good things. Charlie’s already sending it out, so it should be bouncing around in no time.”

“Without edits?” Castiel says.

“No edits,” Chuck says, peering at him over the rim of his glasses. “The more raw the footage is, the better.”

“Did we avoid mentioning Naomi by name?” Castiel asks. “I lost track after a while.”

“Yep, you’re both clear,” Sam says. “She’ll have to twist herself into a pretzel if she wants to accuse you of talking smack about her. Dean, you okay?”

Dean gives him a thumbs up, his face is still pressed to Castiel’s side.

“Chuck,” Castiel says, offering a hand, “thank you. That was very skilful, you made it very easy to keep talking.”

Chuck ducks his head self-consciously. “You’ve a got very easy rhythm together, and I just work with what’s already there, really.”

Pamela clears her throat. “Don’t forget the grunts, honey.”

“No, of course not,” Castiel says. “Dean, get up, we must say thank you to the crew. Come on.”

It does seem a little out of protocol to only talk the crew after the shoot is done, but Pamela waves off Castiel’s worry, saying that this way works fine because the stress of the filming has passed. She introduces them to the camera crew, the sound engineers, plus the station staff that have been so helpful in letting them mix up the equipment for today’s exercise. Dean’s still vibrating a little from the adrenaline, but he manages to smile and shake hands, and Castiel stays close by to make sure that he’s all right.

“Now,” Pamela says, once they’ve gone through the whole roster, “I’m just gonna say what I *know* most of my guys are thinking but are too polite to say anything... Everything you just said – the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

“Pam!” Chuck says.

“Nothing but the truth,” Dean says.

“Thought we did leave out some... embarrassing parts,” Castiel admits. “Maybe after the trials we’ll be able to be more candid.”

Pamela nods. “Dibs, by the way.”

Dean looks at Castiel in surprise. “You want to do more of this?”

“Assuming we’re not in prison,” Castiel says, “and that people still care enough to require clarity then... Yes, I wouldn’t mind at all. Or perhaps I’m just so self-centred that I enjoy talking about myself.”

“Oh please,” Sam says, “you like talking about *Dean*.”

Castiel says, “Yes, that’s true,” while Dean bleats an indignant, “Hey!”

“Uh, can we maybe get a picture?” asks Kurt, one of the cameramen. “You know for... a souvenir.”

Pamela nods. “Excellent idea.”

Castiel and Dean look at each other, and Dean shrugs. “Sure, why not. Sam, don’t you dare skedaddle, *I see you*.”

With Pamela at the helm, everyone gets herded pretty efficiently to one side of the room, and Charlie is called in with her bad-ass camera in tow. Penny and Wayne are brought in as well, and they ask if other staff who weren’t involved directly can join. No one has any problem with that, so two dozen or so people in the building start pouring in, excited to participate. Many of them are already friendly with Dean and Sam, who greet them with smiles and laughs – it’s a large town, but not that large – though sadly Castiel can barely remember their names as they’re introduced in quick succession.

In the end there’s about thirty of them in the room which *just* about fits. While Pamela arranges the group into an aesthetically-pleasing configuration, Castiel realizes: this counts as a response to their interview. Most of these people are civilians and outside the conspiracy that Dean and Castiel were a part of, yet they’re upbeat and cheerful about getting to be part of this moment. No one’s called Dean and Castiel a liar, and most of them seem sympathetic.

It doesn’t mean that *everyone* will be happy, of course, but it fills Castiel with hope.

“Okay, that should be it.” Pamela bounds over into the group, moving happily into the space next to Dean. Castiel and Dean are right in the centre, of course, their shoulders pressed

together and hands loosely clasped, while Chuck stands on Castiel's other side and Sam sits on the floor in front of them.

Charlie raises a hand. "Everybody look at the camera, please. And – smile!"

Dean clasps Castiel's hand a little tighter, and Castiel smiles.

They leave the television station in good spirits. Charlie, Chuck and Pamela have to stay behind to finish up with the transmission, but Sam walks Dean and Castiel back to their car, the three of them bursting with positive energy. Dean and Sam rib each other playfully over the content of the interview ("Wow, Dean, I'm surprised you didn't just take a flying leap out of the seat when you said that Cas proposed," and "Hey, you gotta be subtle sometimes, sasquatch"), while Castiel basks in how cleansing the whole experience was.

It should feel a little like crashing back to earth now that they have to leave town, but it isn't. It's just another step in their mitigation plan, and besides, Dean did promise Castiel a road trip.

"Okay," Sam says, leaning against the car door as Dean and Cas buckle up, "call us as soon as you get there. Don't get distracted or whatever."

"What *are* you talking about?" Dean's barely holding back a grin. "Distracted by what?"

"Why, checking out the sights, of course," Sam says. "Cas will want to see everything, surely."

"That I do," Castiel agrees.

They'd talked about the possible outcomes from making a step this bold. The town may currently be clear of Naomi's agents, but it's better for Dean and Castiel to not stay around as sitting ducks. They're all packed and ready to leave for some distant location only Dean knows, while Sam and the others take care of matters here.

The worst case scenario is that Dean will have to keep on driving until they hit the borders, but Castiel honestly thinks it won't come to that. The interview went very well in presenting their side of the story, plus Dean is aggressively likeable, which Castiel hopes will mitigate the general public's feelings about their deception. Additionally, Naomi has worked too hard on getting the new agreement off the ground and, if she is as smart as she usually is, she'll recognize that he and Dean are no longer the useful icons she wants them to be.

That's Castiel's optimistic view of things. Reality doesn't always match up with what Castiel hopes it will be, though – hence their leaving town before Naomi can swoop in and snatch them up.

“You take care of yourself now, too,” Dean says. “And you gotta watch out for Mom and Anna. If Naomi sends her posse...”

“I know what to do,” Sam says. “See you around, guys.”

“Thank you, Sam,” Castiel says, while Dean reaches through the window to clasp his brother’s arm. “Good luck.”

This time when Dean starts driving there’s no tension in his body, and he immediately turns the radio on to fill the car with music. They are technically fleeing the scene but it doesn’t feel like it at all. This exit is joyful, almost celebratory – as evidenced by the way Dean starts humming with the music and Castiel can’t seem to stop smiling. Castiel knows it will take days, or maybe weeks, to fully process what he’s done, and how much of his old self he’s cast aside, but for now he’s going to enjoy this interlude of a job well done.

Castiel waits until they’ve left the town centre before he unbuttoning the dress shirt and peeling it off, which prompts a careful, “What are you doing?” from Dean.

“This will be a long ride, won’t it?” Castiel reaches over to the backseat for his duffle. “I thought I’d change into something comfortable. The sleeves are scratchy against my elbows, sorry.”

“Oh,” Dean says. “I thought you were gonna suggest some, um... sightseeing. Like Sam said.”

“Sex? We haven’t even passed the town limits yet. Though I’m not against the idea of using the backseat later, if you want.”

“What?” Dean says sharply. “You kidding me, Cas? No, I *don’t* want.”

Castiel stills in the motion of pulling a new shirt on. “Are you against car sex in general? I rather thought it would be your thing.”

“Not in this car,” Dean says firmly. “When we have car sex it’s going to be in *my* car, *my* baby, not this... fridge on wheels.”

“Would it really make a difference?”

“Yes.”

Castiel contemplates this. “What if I offered to eat you out?”

It’s truly impressive that Dean doesn’t swerve the car. His face is stony and his eyes focused on the road, and his only reaction is to lift one hand and wave it warningly in Castiel’s direction.

“No,” Dean says.

“What if I offered to eat you out and spank you?”

“Nope.”

“What if I offered to eat you out and spank you... and I’m wearing something suggestive?”

“You don’t have anything suggestive in your luggage,” Dean says. “I would know, I saw you pack it.”

“This is a theoretical exercise, Dean. I’m just curious about your threshold of interest with regards to the car.”

“The car part is non-negotiable,” Dean declares. “No matter what else you throw at me.”

“What if—”

“*Non-negotiable.*”

“—we had never ever had sex before, and the first time I’ve shown such interest, we happened to be in this car?”

Dean opens his mouth, then closes it again. He glances at Castiel, frowning. “What?”

“Say that we’ve never taken that step before. But you want to, and you thought you’d never have the chance until one day, as we’re driving in this car as we are right now, I reach over and—” Castiel puts his hand on Dean’s arm gently, “—say, ‘Dean, I like you very much, would you like to have intimate relations with me?’”

Dean smacks his lips a little, the way he does when he’s trying not to laugh. “I see you’re as smooth as the day I met you.”

“And I – oh! I’m uncertain about my proposition to you, because it’s so new, right? So there is a reasonable chance that if you delay your response, I will change my mind.” Castiel puts his hands in his lap, pleased with himself. “So do we have sex in this car or not?”

“Ugh.” Dean shakes his head. “Ugh, *fine*, we can have sex in this car. But only in that very... specific... situation, which has nothing to do with us right now.”

“Excellent, thank you.”

“You proud of yourself there?”

“In a manner of speaking. May I take your hand?” Dean frowns at the request, but lets Castiel take his hand and press a kiss inside his wrist. “You’re very precious.”

“I know *that*,” Dean says. “Don’t see what that has to do with anything?”

“Just an observation.” Castiel’s eyes are drawn to the subtle quirk at the corner of Dean’s mouth. Dean’s getting better at letting Castiel tell him these things, but that’s no reason to stop doing it. “The interview went very well, I thought.”

“Yeah. I only freaked out when it was over.”

“That wasn’t a freak out,” Castiel says. “It’s not like what happened the first time we sat for an interview.”

Dean nods. “Yeah, this was just performance nerves. Stick me behind a mic anytime, ditch the cameras. You, uh... you seem lighter, too. Feels good to tell the truth?”

“Very much.”

Dean’s smile softens. “You don’t get to be open like that a lot.”

“No, I don’t,” Castiel agrees. “But times are a-changing. The interview helped put quite a few things in new perspective, much like our discussions last night. For one thing, it reminded me how much you had faith in me, even when I didn’t have faith in myself. I don’t think I would have ever found you again, if you hadn’t been so... Anyway. I am grateful for that, so thank you.”

Dean inhales sharply. “Jesus, Cas, when you say shit like that you make me feel like I can do anything.”

“Anything? Even having sex at the back of a car that’s not your baby?”

“Don’t start that again.”

They drive through the countryside, taking back roads and lonely routes that would make Castiel nervous if Dean didn’t have a story to tell about each place as they pass through it. (“What, you thought I was kidding about hunts taking you everywhere?”) They head east this time, further away from the capital and moving past town after town until they reach the settlements around Lake Crescent, a place Castiel has only seen on postcards and books.

Dean parks them on a sandy rise overlooking the lake, where they also have a good view of one of the towns, which is slowly lit up as evening turns into night. The view is stunning, so Castiel needs no explanation when Dean cuts the engine and makes no motion to leave the car.

“We stayed here for a few months,” Dean says. “It was before Sam was born so I don’t remember much, but I *do* remember Mom telling me all sorts of stories about the creatures living in the lake.”

“Most of them were true?” Castiel asks.

“She says *all* of them were true,” Dean says, smiling. “I think she liked talking about casework so I wouldn’t try to go swimming by myself.”

“Where did you stay?”

“I don’t remember exactly? It was on a hill, but... lots of the hunter lookouts are on hills anyway.”

“Like this one?” Castiel looks over his shoulder at the metal house built into the rocky outcrop not too far behind them, and Dean hums an acknowledgement. It’s an old, sturdy building, though not as old as the stone hunter fortresses Castiel has had the pleasure of seeing during his journeys. Castiel knows from Dean’s stories that hunters occasionally hand over smaller homes like this from one to another, much the same way as they pass on their local duties, but Castiel hadn’t imagined that such homes could come with sublime views such as this.

“I wouldn’t mind moving around the country with you, if all the places we stayed were like this,” Castiel says.

“Sadly, no,” Dean says. “Donna just lucked out with this one. And it’s no picnic staying out here, you know? Just look at that hike. Can you imagine what the grocery runs must be like?”

“I lived in a forest town for weeks, Dean.”

“Rexford is different. It’s actually nice to walk around there.”

“Did I tell you about the time I lived on an actual mountain? It was ancient building, haunted on almost every floor because they couldn’t be bothered to bring exorcists in on the regular. It was one of Uriel’s family homes and we should have been able to see the sea, except the clouds kept getting in the way.”

“I’m guessing this place here is nicer than Uriel’s?”

“That room you put me in at Chambers is nicer than Uriel’s.”

“Hey, *I* didn’t put you in that room.”

“It was terrible,” Castiel says. “So awful, so traumatizing. You must kiss me now to make amends.”

“You’re so weird,” Dean replies, but he kisses Castiel anyway. They miss the rest of the sun setting, but it’s all right.

The Sheriff finds them like that, pressed together in the cramped front seat, though they jerk apart at the startling sweep of a flashlight beam into the car. Well at least Dean does the jerking apart, almost knocking his head against the window, while Castiel blinks dazedly and licks his lips.

“Heeeey.” Dean fumbles for the window handle, and even succeeds in getting it to work after a few attempts. “Donna, hey, hi, good to see you.”

Donna leans forward, her grin almost as bright as the glare of her flashlight. “Hullo, fancy seeing you here, Dean.”

“Haha,” Dean says. “Uh, this is Cas.”

“Of course,” Donna says. “Sheriff Donna Hanscum, nice to be meeting you. Are your doors not working?”

“Right, right.” Castiel follows Dean out of the car, where Donna has a huge hug for Dean and a firm handshake for Castiel.

“Always good to see you, Dean!” Donna’s still smiling. “I’ve been wanting to meet this man of yours. Maybe you gentlemen didn’t see the lights on in the house?”

“No, we just,” Dean coughs, “the – the view, you know, Cas hasn’t seen it before, and... Oh come on, we’re marr – okay, we’re not married *anymore*, but it’s pretty damn close.”

“Sure is,” Donna says. “But before we get into any of that, you’re getting your bags and coming in for dinner.”

Donna’s an easy-going one, and plenty chatty as she leads them up the sandy pathway to her house. Castiel listens with interest as Donna explains how excited she was when Charlie contacted her to help out with the transmission relay, since she was also part of the relay for Dean’s pirate radio station and was looking forward to the challenge of an upgrade. “The lake’s the lowest point in the county so we’re a crossroad for the main lines anyway, it’s only logical.”

The inside of the metal house is far cozier than Castiel would have guessed. There are brightly-colored posters, flower pots lining various surfaces, and comfortable furniture that would not be amiss in the Winchester home. Dean’s obviously comfortable here as well, heading straight for the kitchen to get a drink.

The TV in the sitting area is on, and Castiel starts a little when he sees his and Dean’s faces on the screen. It’s not raw footage from the shoot, but some sort of edited picture-in-picture version with commentary scrolling across a ribbon on the bottom of the screen. The set-up looks different from this angle, too – smaller, almost intimate – unless Castiel really just hadn’t realized how close he and Dean had been sitting.

“Yep,” Donna says, “they’ve been playing that show of yours on almost every channel.”

“It can’t be more than an hour long,” Castiel says.

“Oh, you know,” Donna says, “the news channels got a hold of it, then the talk shows... everyone has their two cents. This one’s a recap on our nightly news, Gavin and Michelle are analyzing the whole thing, it’s fantastic. Oh, and I was in town today to check that the transmission was getting through? Ended up staying over at Joey’s—”

“That’s the local bar,” Dean calls out from the kitchen.

“—over lunch to see the whole thing myself.” Donna pats Castiel on the arm. “Quite a show.”

“What is the general sentiment?” Castiel asks. “How are people reacting?”

“It’s a mix,” Donna says. “Tony said he knew it was all a sham from the beginning, but he’s one of those conspiracy theorists, I wouldn’t worry about that. Brandon thought the whole

thing was super romantic—”

“What?” Dean says, reappearing at Castiel’s side with a pair of juice-filled glasses. He passes one to Castiel and echoes, “Romantic?”

“Oh yeah, sure!” Donna nods rapidly. “Not just him, quite a few others were thinking the same. You know... somehow finding your life partner in the middle of all that hullabaloo, it’s very gosh darn epic. And he said it’s crying shame that you got trapped the way you did. Marcia, though – she had to have a sit down when she saw it, I had to get the emergency sweet stash out to help.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Castiel says.

“This weeding-therapy Marcia?” Dean asks.

“She’s the sweetest lady in the world,” Donna declares. “She was so happy that you’d found your sweetheart, so it’s a shock to find out it was a ruse, you know. We’re gonna go see her tomorrow to make her feel better.”

“What?” Dean says. “No.”

“It’s the least you can do,” Donna says. “You’re only staying for the night, aren’t you? I help you out, you help me out.”

“I’d love to meet your friend Marcia,” Castiel says.

Donna beams. “Thank you.”

Dean sighs. “What happened to laying low, Cas?”

“Donna says Marcia’s the sweetest lady in the world,” Castiel says.

“Aww, Dean,” Donna says, “Marcia’s not gonna call Naomi. Besides, Ellen’s already made her statement with – oh, you don’t know about that yet!” She rushes over to the TV, flipping through the channels until she finds a news bulletin and sets the volume higher.

Dean takes a startled step towards the TV. “Whoa hey, it’s Ellen. Is this today?”

“Yeah,” Donna says. “Just a few hours ago.”

The footage appears to be of a press conference, judging from the podium, banners, and rapid flicking of cameras. Ellen Harvelle is standing at the forefront and answering questions addressed to her by the press, and flanking her are a few of her people, Kevin and Jo among them.

The rhythm of Ellen’s answers tells Castiel that she’s been talking for a while, but in this clip she’s saying, “*Yes, we are aware, but it isn’t an issue that the Council has any interest in pursuing at this time. The Winchesters have requested that we respect their privacy, and we will honor that as it is no longer a matter of state.*”

“*Why didn’t they make this announcement in the city?*” someone in the press asks.

“*Only they can answer that,*” Ellen answers. “*But the House of Harvelle wishes them all the blessings in the world.*”

“Hah!” Dean exclaims. “Ellen’s got our back! Naomi’s screwed!”

Dean may be exulted but Castiel is not, and opts instead to step up behind Dean and wrap his arms around Dean’s waist. Castiel watches the rest of the press conference like that, with his eyes wide and the lower half of his face pressed against Dean’s shoulder.

“Hey,” Dean says, covering Castiel’s hands with his own. “This is a good thing.”

“I know,” Castiel says. “But I just had a vivid mental image of Naomi watching our interview.”

Dean laughs. “You’re only thinking about that now?”

“Feels more real after watching Ellen make a press conference about it.”

“How do you think Naomi would react?”

“She’d probably go very quiet,” Castiel says. “If there are any staff in the room, she’d ask them to leave so she can think. She won’t lash out at the first available person the way Michael would, but... she will be tempted. That’s the difference between her and the former king – she’ll put everyone else out of the way so she can focus on herself, and figuring out what needs to be done.”

“I’m still surprised she hasn’t made a play to become king,” Dean says.

“The crown wouldn’t suit her purposes.” Castiel tightens his grip around Dean. “I hope she understands what we’ve tried to do with the broadcast. There has to be a villain in the story we’ve just shared with the world, and it doesn’t have to be her.”

Ellen answers a few more questions about the things they said in the interview – mostly about the Council’s early ineffectiveness in dealing with Michael and Lucifer – and then the scene switches over to a pair of newscasters who start discussing the clip that they just aired.

“There’s more,” Donna said. “There’ll be another bulletin somewhere for sure, but there was a bit – I can’t remember if it was before or after – that she apologized for their part in making y’all go along with the fake love story.”

“She apologized?” Dean says. “Naomi’s *really* screwed now.”

When Dean told Castiel about his sheriff friend who lives out by Lake Crescent and practically ‘runs the town’ (Dean’s words), Castiel imagined someone more along the lines of Jo Harvelle, or perhaps Bobby Singer. Donna Hanscum is something else entirely, cheerful and focused and almost viciously optimistic in a way that Castiel rather envies. Castiel may be feeling good about his life at the moment, but that’s still something of an anomaly, and it would be nice to have access to such optimism whenever he needs it.

Mostly what Castiel learns from this visit is that Dean’s friendship-making skills will never stop being impressive, and Castiel should really just expect that Dean knows everyone in the Republic who’s worth knowing (an exaggeration, but it does feel like it sometimes). When Castiel says this out loud, Donna bursts out with delighted laughter, and Dean declares that he might indeed have that as a superpower since he *did* serendipitously find Castiel that first night in Benny’s bar.

Donna responds by putting her fists under her chin and giving the most heartfelt, mock-free, “Aww!” that Castiel’s ever heard in his life.

When dinner is done, Donna takes them to the spare room where she’s set up her radio station. The set-up is larger than Anna’s and far more organized, that Castiel regrets that he doesn’t have a camera to take a picture and show his sister. It takes only the press of a few buttons to connect them with the Winchester house, and then Donna bows out of the room.

Anna answers the call. “*Hello?*”

“It’s us,” Dean says. “Where’s Sam?”

“*Um, okay, are you sitting down? It’s not bad news, I promise. Is Castiel there?*”

Castiel leans towards the microphone. “Yes, hello. This place is beautiful.”

Anna laughs. “*That’s great, I’ll have to try to get out there one day. Anyway, yes. Sam is currently in the middle of an interview. Vans of intercity press started arriving a few hours after the transmission started, so he and Mary are handling that. Don’t worry, Chuck and Pamela are still around, I think Mary might have hired them as PR consultants? I’m not sure of the details, it was kind of sudden.*”

Dean sighs. “The press better not be ruining the garden.”

“*Oh no, of course not, Mary wouldn’t have any of them inside the house, they’re all in the fields across the street. It’s a circus here, really.*”

“I assume the press wanted to see us?” Castiel asks.

“*Naturally,*” Anna replies. “*Here’s the good part. The press got here before Naomi’s agents did. So imagine, if you will, Naomi’s secretaries in their pressed suits and embossed badges, having to walk through the throng of reporters to meet us. Dean, your mother is so shrewd – she wouldn’t let them in the house either, and made them announce what they were here for in front of everyone.*”

“Fantastic,” Dean says.

“They came to deliver a... well, a gracious, polite, and subtly passive aggressive letter from Naomi herself, congratulating you over the divorce. She said that she’s received a full copy of the filing, and finds your argument that Michael broke the terms of the agreement by applying the secondary binding to be very interesting, and she will give it her, and I quote, ‘due consideration’. She also attached her itinerary for Michael’s transport back to the kingdom and the trials with Lucifer, and she asked for confirmation if you’ll be available to attend.”

“Did she say anything about the two-year waiting period?” Castiel asks. “Or the penalty fine?”

“No, but I think it’s covered in the ‘due consideration’ part. She’ll consider it, but no promises.”

Castiel frowns. “So that’s it?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

Dean looks at Castiel curiously. “Were you expecting something else?”

“Well,” Castiel says, “in Naomi’s lingo, she’s practically telling us to fuck ourselves.”

“That she is. ‘Fuck y’all, but attend the fucking trials’.”

“It’s not good enough,” Castiel says. “Are her secretaries gone? Can you send a message to them from us?”

“They’re gone, but I should be able to get in touch with them again, yes. What would you like me to say?”

Castiel takes a breath. “I think Naomi should make a press statement on this. Officially. Written is fine, but on television would be better, like what Ellen did. If she does that, we will make ourselves available for her schedule on the transportation and trials.”

“She might not like you backing her even more into a corner.”

“It’s for security,” Castiel says. “I don’t want another contract with her, or with anyone else from the royal House, but we do need assurance that she won’t take us into custody. Making her accountable to the public should cover it. Any thoughts, Dean?”

“You know Naomi better than I do,” Dean says. “But I have to say that that since Ellen put herself out there, I’m down for Naomi having to do the same.”

“Are you hedging your bets on public opinion being sympathetic towards you? Because winds change.”

“It doesn’t matter what the public thinks of us or what we’ve done. It only matters that they can *see* us now, just as they should be able to see Naomi. She should be aware of how she can spin this to her advantage. She wants to show that the Regency is different from Michael’s

rule? A way to do that is to disavow the choices of Michael's reign, including the usage of our marriage to solidify the agreement."

"You know that *she* was behind our fake love story," Dean says.

"*So she can choose to own it and make amends for it,*" Anna says, understanding. "*People do like reformers, and it would show solidarity with Ellen, who has admitted to being a part of it.*"

"Yes," Castiel says. "Ellen spoke up first to take the brunt of it. I think Naomi could have gotten away with not saying anything at all, but we shouldn't let her. Relay our request."

"Got it," Anna says. "*Anything else?*"

"How's my father?" Dean asks. "Do you know?"

"*I didn't get to speak to John, but Sam told me that he has leave from Ellen to come out here and join us. Oh, and... Hannah is doing very well in the city promoting your cause. She may have done a tad too well? Let's just say that the photo Lucifer took of you in captivity is circulating like hotcakes, which adds on to the feeling that the two of you have been badly served by the powers that be.*"

"Excellent," Castiel says. "More pressure on Naomi."

"Dude," Dean says.

"Is it too much?" Castiel looks at him. "Do you disagree?"

"Nah." Dean drops a kiss to Castiel's ear. "It's hot."

"*There's also your lack of citizenship papers,*" Anna reminds him. "*Shall I bring that up as well?*"

"No, don't push that yet," Castiel says. "We'll do this one step at a time. Thank you, Anna."

They talk a little more about what Anna and the others plan to do next. Mary wants to ride the tide of local goodwill with the press for a while longer, but Sam has reservations because there's the risk of their saying something wrong and bringing the rest of the Campbell clan down on their heads. Dean and Castiel believe that they'll figure it out.

"Just let us know what y'all decide," Dean says. "Me and Cas said what we wanted to say, so you should have your say as well. You, too, Anna."

There's a pause. "*I don't... I'm not really part of...*"

"Anna," Castiel says. "You've been through as much as the rest of us, and I wouldn't have been able to do any of this without you. Please take your share, if you want it."

"*I love you, Castiel.*"

“And me!” Dean says.

Anna sighs. *“Yes, Dean. Ah, that reminds me – some of the reporters asked us to congratulate you on your elopement.”*

“It’s not a...” Castiel trails off. “Oh.”

Dean’s eyes go wide, and he guffaws loudly. “Does it count as an elopement if you’re running away to get a divorce? Hey hey hey, maybe it’s an... eNOPEment.”

“Wow,” Anna says.

Dean nudges him with his elbow. “Say it, Cas. Enopement.”

“No.”

“I think that’s my cue to sign off. Check in same time tomorrow?”

“Yep,” Dean says. “Thanks again.”

“Good night, Anna,” Castiel says. “Take care.”

With the radio off and the conversation ended, the only noise left is coming from the television playing outside. Even that is slightly muted through the closed door, so this leaves Donna’s spare room abruptly quiet and the thoughts in Castiel’s head abruptly loud.

They’ve done it. They’ve made their play and Naomi has presented her response. She hasn’t conceded, but Castiel never expected that from her. The closest he’d hoped for was an acknowledgement that she no longer holds them in any legal way, and they have it. She could change her mind in the future, of course, but they can take steps to prevent such things, or deal with it as they happen. There’s no such thing as certainty in the future, anyway.

“Cas,” Dean says.

“Yes?”

“You need a hug?”

Castiel exhales. “Yes.”

Dean wraps his arms around Castiel and squeezes him firmly. Castiel presses his face against the side of Dean’s neck and closes his eyes.

For many years, Castiel knew exactly where his place in the world was. He may not have necessarily liked where that place *was*, but there was a sense of security in knowing that it was there. A child of traitor parents, brother of an exile, cousin of the king – these qualifiers meant there would always be a designated space for him in the oftentimes unpredictable royal realm.

Was it stifling? Perhaps a little, but Castiel knew well enough to appreciate that it could have been worse. The king was merciful and didn't care about his choice of vocation and style of living, as long as he didn't embarrass the royal House. Castiel hadn't lied when he told Dean that he had been content in that life.

Tonight Castiel is in a metal house overlooking Lake Crescent. He's in a country he has no legal right to be in, in the house of a woman he's just met, with a man who has no legal ties to him whatsoever. There is a decided lack of security in Castiel's current status, so by all accounts he should feel terrified, or at the very least nervous. He is not.

"We did it," Dean says. "We're out."

"Thank you," Castiel says quietly. "I know I – I've upended your life so much, Dean, you never even needed to be a part of this if—"

"Whoa, slow down there." Dean draws back and cups Castiel's face in his hands. "I got a pretty sweet end of the deal here, okay, Cas? Sure, this isn't where I thought I'd be right now but damn if it ain't better. Thank *you*."

Castiel nods weakly. "Enopement."

Dean blinks, and bursts out laughing. "Oh my God. Oh my God, you're the awesomest." He wraps an arm around Castiel's shoulder and hauls him in, slapping his back warmly and kissing the side of his face. "I'm gonna marry you so hard, Cas, y'hear?"

"I'm not sure what that means, but I accept the sentiment."

Truth be told, Castiel may not be scared, but he is a little overwhelmed at the sudden flush of very real possibilities opening up to him now. What about his apartment, and his career back at the University? Can he still teach? Does he want to teach? If he takes up teaching again, how does that fit in with Dean's hunting career? Where will they settle down? Do they even have the resources to settle down? Is it even right that they settle down when there are so many other things that are yet to be dealt with – Michael and Lucifer's trials, the northerners that Castiel's still responsible for, Dean's extended family politics, et cetera.

How exciting it is that they may pursue the answers for all these questions now, on their own terms. Castiel can't wait to begin.

"We can go back," Castiel says. "We could return to your family, deal with the press."

"Sure, we could do that," Dean says. "Or we can trust them to take of it and keep on driving, see what we find. You said you wanted to visit Nora again, right? To explain all this to her in person?"

"You wish to keep traveling without your car?"

Dean frowns. "Point. We'll pick her up again first. Then we drive?"

Castiel smiles. "Then we drive."

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Epilogue

Dean's room is barely recognizable now. The closet is empty, most of the shelves are bare, and a great deal of floor space is taken up by boxes. The Winchester house is large enough that there are other rooms that Castiel could use – especially one that doesn't currently resemble a store room – but he'd been adamant about using this one.

Castiel is sitting on the bed, his hands flat on the blanket. The bed's been made really neatly, but Castiel has no qualms about giving in to his impulse of lying down, face pressed into the pillow that still somewhat smells of Dean.

When someone knocks at the door, Castiel doesn't get up. "Come in," he calls out.

The door opens. "What are you doing?"

"Relaxing," Castiel says.

John makes an unimpressed sound. "Right. Well, you have a visitor."

"Visitors are supposed to go to the pavilion," Castiel says.

"Castiel," John says. "Get up, please."

"Mmm." Castiel sits up carefully and squints at the door. John is watching him with a mild frown, but peering around him is a face Castiel hadn't expected to see today. "Rachel! You made it."

"Yes." Rachel steps into the room tentatively, bewildered by its state but trying to be polite about it. "It was surprisingly easy, in fact."

"I'm glad," Castiel says. "But first – John. Why are you in the house?"

John scowls at him. "It's my house."

"That doesn't explain why you're inside it right now." Castiel narrows his eyes. "Are the Campbells here?"

"I don't appreciate you insinuating that I'm hiding my ass," John says.

"I said no such thing," Castiel says. "*Are* they here?"

"They didn't have to come," John grumbles.

“You didn’t have to invite them,” Castiel points out. “Please go back outside.”

John’s scowl deepens. “Don’t tell me what to do in my own damn house.”

“Mary’s out there by herself,” Castiel says.

“Wow,” John says flatly. “Low blow there, son.”

“Just pointing that out.”

“Fine.” John shakes his head. “Hey get up, don’t want to ruin your robes. Rachel, can you make sure he doesn’t lie down again?”

“Of course, sir,” Rachel says, bemused.

“Thank you, John,” Castiel says.

John wanders off after imparting that final instruction, muttering about Castiel’s genius of taking a nap now, of all times. Rachel closes the door at Castiel’s nod, and then turns her full attention to him with a wide smile. It’s then that Castiel notices that Rachel’s brought a gift with her – a black box with gold emboss around the edges.

“Oh, you can leave presents with Anna,” Castiel says. “She’s in charge of that.”

“Yes, I saw her downstairs, and I left *my* present with her,” Rachel says. “But this is from Naomi, and officially the reason that I’m here today.”

Castiel huffs a laugh when Rachel bows and presents the box. There’s no one around to even see her do this, but nothing will stop Rachel from taking pride in her work. Castiel bows in return and accepts the box, placing it on his knees.

“How long will you be in the country this time?” Castiel asks.

“A week at most,” Rachel says. “Just came for this and some other business.”

“Really? That sounds very tight.”

“It is,” Rachel says. “Explains why I’m here in my work wear. Didn’t have time to get something nice.”

“You know that doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does,” Rachel insists. “I’ve seen what your other guests are wearing.”

“We don’t have a dress code.”

“I didn’t say something fancy, I said something *nice*. Anna looks lovely in her sundress, I am most envious.”

“You should tell her that.” Castiel breaks the last catch and lifts the lid, revealing a blue velvet pouch set into foam casing. Inside the pouch is an oval seal built into a narrow wooden

handle, the whole piece slightly discolored but clearly restored recently. Castiel's breath catches when he turns it over, the clean and distinct symbols glinting in the light.

"Everything of my parents' was destroyed," Castiel says. "At least, that's what I was told. How does she even have this?"

"We're still dismantling Michael's private treasures," Rachel says. "That was found in one of them."

"So Michael kept it all this time. Of course he did, it's one of his father's trophies." Castiel runs his thumb over the tree, then down to the sharp corners of the anvil nestled inside the shield. He doesn't know anything of his parents beyond what other people have told him, but he likes to believe they'd be happy for him – not just for today, but for everything he's found in his new life.

Sure, he never got to become an advanced professor, but that's not entirely his fault, what with University bearing the brunt of the uprisings against Michael in the north. Castiel thinks he did a good job salvaging what was left of his work and helping with the recovery process, and it's only natural to siphon that into his current crafting workshops, which are pretty damn cool (and he has on good authority the Men of Letters are eyeing closely). On top of that, he only visits court when *he* wants to, and he's finally getting the hang of being domestic, and the only really stressful thing he has to deal with these days are the persistent proposals for celebrity sponsorship deals people keep trying to hook him into.

Of course, there's also the matter that he's marrying a man who should be impossible, yet exists.

"Please thank Naomi for me, though I'll write to her myself later," Castiel says at last. "I will take good care of this seal, just as I hope she will take good care of Michael and Lucifer. How are they?"

"Still dealing poorly with retirement. There are plans to throw a party if either one of them can last half a year without attempting to incite rebellion."

"Don't tell me things like that on my wedding day."

"Apologies." Rachel smiles warmly. "You look wonderful. Much better than the last time, though that should be obvious. May I fix your robe? The sleeves are a little..."

While most items in Dean's room have been packed away, the tall mirror next to the closet has been left untouched. Castiel stands in front of it now, arms loose by his side as Rachel fiddles with his sleeves. It's not the same robe he wore over two years ago, but it's similar enough to ping Castiel with *déjà vu* whenever he looks at his reflection. It's only two years ago but Castiel still finds himself thinking on how young and foolhardy he was then, how unprepared he was for everything.

"I can't believe we're already here." Rachel presses a hand to her mouth to compose herself. "I'm so happy you get this. How you must've waited."

“It wasn’t so bad,” Castiel replies.

Truth be told, two years went by far too quickly. Castiel once thought twenty-four months a cruel stretch to bear, but it’s turned out to be a mere blip wherein he and Dean have proven themselves to be highly unproductive.

Point: Castiel is still technically an exile, with no paperwork to show for his having a right to stay here. This issue mattered once, but with the international borders open again and so many exiles hanging around the Republic anyway, it’s become almost fashionable to flaunt the old restrictions, which are now viewed as quaint and outdated. Castiel knows they should have done something about his personal status, except everything else kept happening and then it made more sense just to pretend that it wasn’t an issue anymore because it’s just plain *faster* to get married again.

Another point: Dean is the pickiest person in the world, or at least it feels that way to Castiel sometimes. He understands that Dean has a tremendous attachment to his parents’ home and another tremendous attachment to his car, so he would be just as finicky when it comes to picking a place to make their home. (*Home!* What a concept.) It has to be the right size, the right shape, the right location (not too far from the Winchester home, and in a nice town, and near a major highway, so on so forth), and it’s not as though they had that much free time to go house hunting in between dealing with their various responsibilities. The fact that they finally decided on a place and settled the paperwork two months ago is a minor miracle, though that led to an intense debate on whether they had enough time to get that place ready for a wedding.

Logic won out, so Castiel’s low-key fantasy of getting married in their own house isn’t a reality. The Winchester seat is an excellent substitute though, and there are many advantages in his in-laws knowing nearly everyone in this county, and thus being able to arrange everything with utmost efficiency and impressiveness.

“It doesn’t even feel as crucial as it once did,” Castiel admits. “Don’t get me wrong, I want this very much, but the ceremony is a mere affirmation of what’s already there. I’ve been married to Dean all this time. This just makes it legal. Again.”

There’s another knock at the door, and this time it’s Anna who peers in. She is breathtakingly radiant; the flowers in her hair and sparkles on her dress almost pale in comparison to her glow of excitement. “Hi Rachel, sorry gotta cut this short. It’s time.”

“Of course.” Rachel nods at Castiel. “I’ll see you at the party.”

“You won’t be at the ceremony?” Castiel asks.

“I’ll be at the ceremony,” Rachel says, “but let’s be real, you’re not going to have eyes for anyone but Dean.”

“She’s right,” Anna says.

“Can you blame me, though?” Castiel asks.

Anna laughs. “Not gonna answer that.”

With Rachel gone, Castiel is left with his sister, who fusses around him in double-checking that his appearance is just right. Anna may be restless in her enthusiasm but Castiel is calm, so calm that he could easily have that nap John accused him of taking earlier.

“Naomi sent me something.” Castiel inclines his head to the seal, and watches Anna gasp in surprise. “You can keep it, if you want? You remember them more than I do.”

Anna cups the seal reverently, but then shakes her head and returns it to its box. “No, this is yours. You should keep it in that library you’re planning, along with the other... historical items you should add to your collection.” She gestures at Castiel’s head.

Castiel automatically tries to squint up at the silver circlet threaded through his hair, but it’s still only visible via a mirror. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“I’m just saying, if Dean can make that for you, he can certainly make it for other people who ask nicely.”

“But I’m special.”

“Hah!” Anna kisses him on the cheek and stands back, gazing up at him with such affection. “Keep the seal, little brother. I’ll come visit it when I need to. We remember and honor the good parts of our past, but we don’t cling to it, no more than we do the... unpleasant parts. I know I’m saying the obvious, but I figure it’s always worth remembering that this is your life to figure out as you want, with the help of someone who’s chosen to intertwine his life with yours. Both of you will be brilliant.”

Castiel loves how Anna speaks as though these are all known things, as true as the cool of snow and the green of Dean’s eyes. He hopes that Mary or John is telling Dean something similar right now.

The last time Castiel saw Dean was yesterday morning, before Castiel retreated to this room for a last day of prayer and reflection. It’s not strictly necessary but Castiel liked the idea of meditating on everything it took them to get here, and what he hopes they’ll achieve after. (Dean said that Castiel just wanted to leave the hard prep work to everyone else.) Spending his last technically-single day with his thoughts helps bring everything into perspective, especially after the last few months dealing with the last of the royal trials, finding a place of their own, and avoiding the ever-thickening pressure of public curiosity as the two-year countdown reached its final stage.

This marriage has nothing to do with any House, or the Regency, or anyone else. This is for him and Dean. This is *about* him and Dean. Castiel has no shame in being intensely selfish, because they deserve it.

“I’m ready,” Castiel says.

Anna dabs a knuckle at the corner of her eye. “Right. Let’s go.”

Castiel's steps are steady as he descends stairs, Anna close behind him. Castiel walks past the kitchen where the wedding presents have been stacked, through the living area, to the front door. The edge of a maroon carpet has been set at the frame of the open door, and the carpet itself stretches in a long path across the garden, through the wide open gates, and across the road (closed for the day, naturally) to the wedding pavilion in the clearing opposite.

Anna kneels at Castiel's feet to help him out of his shoes, and then bows and takes her place behind him. Castiel presses a hand to his ribs, over where the single wing of his tattoo rests, and then steps out into the sunlight. There is faint music playing, but Castiel's focus is on the pavilion, which is decorated with silks and banners that obscure the guests standing inside.

Castiel can't see Dean when he starts walking, but he will.

Rachel wasn't entirely right when she said that Castiel wouldn't notice everyone gathered on either side of his path. He does notice them, and the way they've fallen into a hush, all of them watchful and many of them smiling as Castiel pads his way towards the tall, well-cut figure of Dean waiting for him at the far end with the cleric. Castiel registers this audience because it is not the audience they had two and a half years ago. Sam, Mary and John are here with open hearts, as is Anna and many others – Charlie, Victor, Hannah, Nora, Benny, Kevin and so on. Their presence is validating.

Of course, their audience isn't limited to the people who are physically here. They have the mayor's permission to keep the press and non-invitees at a distance from the street, but people still watch and listen at a remove. Some of those people are unkind, and bets have been made as to whether this wedding would even take place. It pisses Dean off but Castiel doesn't mind; he likes to imagine Lucifer putting money into one of those betting pools. Better to focus on the outpouring of love and support that has come their way since their public confession – a lot of it Castiel feels is undeserved, because the only thing he and Dean have done is love each other, and tell the truth about it.

If anyone asked Dean today, he'd tell them he'd had no doubt whatsoever that he and Castiel would get here again. When Dean sets his faith upon something, heaven and earth cannot move it. Admittedly Dean wouldn't call it 'faith' – he'd say that he's being a stubborn son-of-a-bitch who's gonna fight for a good thing as long as he has blood in his body. He and Castiel have proven that together over and over, through the royal trials and Michael's escape attempts and various petty uncertainties as to how they should settle down. Truly, of the whole two years in getting there, there were only a few weeks where Castiel thought they wouldn't make it, and that was only because of that awful amnesia curse that struck Dean during a routine hunt. When it comes to *them*, Castiel is far more assured.

That knowledge is strength, and it has Castiel keeping his head up high and proud as he keeps walking.

At last he reaches Dean, who is resplendent in his dark suit that's cut with his badges of office and the Winchester colors. It is a difficult task, but Dean is much handsomer today than he was at their other wedding. Dean is also much more flushed in the face, and unable to meet his eyes when Castiel stops and stands facing him.

This is no surprise to Castiel, either. Dean is a mighty well of emotion, so Castiel is unfazed by Dean's damp cheeks and sheepish half-smirk. Castiel's only sadness is that Dean is embarrassed by his being so open with his feelings. Dean's eyes flick around self-consciously, and his hands twitch as though unsure whether he should wipe his face or pretend that nothing's happening.

Castiel tips his head a little, moving with him until Dean can't avoid his gaze. Once Dean's looking at him, Castiel widens his eyes exaggeratedly and purses his lips, which has Dean inhaling sharply, a startled smile cutting through his distress. Castiel grins, and Dean shakes his head a little, his eyes glittering with a perfectly distinct: *'dammit, Cas'*.

It still takes Castiel's breath away, how much they make each other happy.

When Jim – their cleric – starts speaking, Castiel turns a little towards him, wanting to hear the words of the binding. The opening is typical but Castiel likes being reminded of the layers of marriage: spiritual, emotional, legal, et cetera, and how that bond it is not to be taken lightly. Castiel nods along, but is distracted when he feels a slight tugging on one of sleeves. He doesn't need to look down to know that Dean's holding on to the edge of one of Castiel's draped sleeves.

If they weren't in the middle of getting married, Castiel would say: *We're not at the touching part yet, Dean.*

And Dean would reply: *What, am I touching you? No, I'm not. Shh, just go with it.*

It is distracting though, and Castiel almost misses the part where Jim says that second chances come to all, and the temple is glad that the two souls before him are reentering the bond with openness and full readiness. It's a nice touch, and Castiel finds himself smiling with him when Jim steps forward with the cloth.

Jim's a friend of John's, and one of his selling points for today's event is his subtle theatricality. That comes into play now as he flips the cloth out from its square. The silver-gold print of a shield, with its sun-moon pieces above the running impala, briefly flash in the sunlight before disappearing in the folds as it falls lax. Castiel and Dean's herald hasn't been formalized yet but right there's the teaser, and soon enough Dean's Impala will have her own copy of the badge to display to all.

"This binding hold you both," Jim says, "and tighter than t'was before."

Castiel pushes the folds of his left sleeve out of the way while Dean does the same, and then they draw closer, clasping their hands together. The motion brings Castiel almost directly in front of Dean, and near enough that he can hear the way that Dean's trying to control his breathing, tamping down on the shaky breaths of earlier. Castiel lets himself move even closer, nudging a foot against Dean's as Jim wraps the binding cloth around their arms.

Dean rolls his eyes, and his smile takes on that goofy, lopsided slant that always gets Castiel's stomach fluttering. It's predictable, but predictable doesn't mean boring, which is another lesson Castiel's been happy to learn over the past few years. Everything about Dean – and

being with Dean – is so exciting, and Castiel is only calm right now because he knows he can take his time savoring all that excitement in the years to come.

“Do you accept, Dean of Winchester?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Dean says, his voice low and hoarse. “I do.”

When it’s Castiel’s turn, he pitches his voice equally low, “I do.”

Castiel gasps at the snap of the binding cloth, his attention briefly deviated from Dean when he looks down at the fresh glow of new tattoos across their arms. The patterns are deliberately different this time, coiling thicker around their elbows and tapering into finer letters near their wrists. The design also leaves space for later ink spellwork, just as they’d asked.

“You may kiss,” Jim says.

Dean goes a little wide-eyed for reasons Castiel can’t be sure of – perhaps it’s amazement that they’ve done it, or uncertainty as to which of their many kisses is necessary right now (there was a wedding rehearsal, but they didn’t cover this part). Castiel raises his hands and presses the tips of his fingers on Dean’s cheeks, just below his eyes, and then slowly trails his fingers down through the damp tracks until he’s resting them just under Dean’s chin. Dean need not be embarrassed in front of Castiel for anything, because he will accept everything.

Castiel presses his lips to Dean’s. Dean snaps out of his stupor and grabs Castiel’s elbows firmly. He holds Castiel like this sometimes, his grip almost desperate despite Castiel’s assurances that he’s not going anywhere. Castiel always lets him.

Castiel draws his mouth away first, and reaches around Dean to hold him, the thick material of Dean’s suit smooth against Castiel’s hands. Dean’s hands move as well, pulling Castiel in for one of his solid hugs, if just a tad stronger than usual. Castiel makes a faint “Oof” at being squeezed, but he sets a hand to the back of Dean’s head, holding him close.

There are so many things that Castiel is thankful for. He will do his best to be worthy of all of them.

Somewhere nearby there’s chittering and faint laughter, followed by singular clapping that is soon joined in by others.

At long last Dean takes a deep breath and pulls back. This time his expression is fierce, focused. Castiel sees it coming, and tips his chin a little when Dean kisses him again. It’s completely unnecessary, but it’s their wedding and they’ll do what they want.

The second time they part, Dean takes Castiel’s hand and thanks Jim, who smiles and nods warmly. Castiel echoes the thanks, and then they turn around to face their audience. Dean, with his face set in that perfectly macho expression that has graced countless magazine covers, raises a hand in a triumphant *Fuck yeah!* that sets off a rolling applause in the pavilion. Castiel laughs and bumps his nose against the side of Dean’s face, and when he

hears the click of a camera – either Charlie’s or Chuck’s – he’s glad of it, because these are indeed moments worth saving.

The music starts up again and they start walking, back down the carpet to the far end of the pavilion for the first wine drinking. People throw flower petals as they pass – Castiel spots Nora and Kevin among them, as well as Balthazar who somehow manages to get whole fistfuls of petals in the air. Mary and John don’t, but that’s only because John’s busy scowling and pressing a manful fist to his mouth, while Mary pats him.

At the end of pavilion Sam and Anna are waiting for them with the glasses of wedding wine. The music is loud and people are still cheering, so Castiel almost misses Sam’s, “Hey Dean, drink up, you’re gonna get dehydrated.”

“I’m gonna let that pass,” Dean says, “because it’s my wedding day and I get to be the bigger man.”

“That was wonderful,” Anna says. “Here you go. Blessings for this day.”

“Blessings for this day,” Castiel echoes, taking his glass from her. “And for you, husband.”

Dean starts a little at the long-unused moniker, then breaks out into a slow grin. “Been waiting to use that one, have you?”

“Yes.” Castiel peers at Dean over the rim of his glass. It’s fascinating to watch Dean’s emotions shift from moment to moment – where he’d previously been on the verge of hiccups he’s now powerful, alert, and almost shaking with excitement. Castiel half-expects Dean to spill the wine as he drinks, which would be a damn shame considering how flattering his suit is. The cut accentuates the angles of his body superbly, and the collar dramatically draws Castiel’s eye to the provocative, cleanly-shaven skin there.

However, the best part is how happy Dean is. He’s buoyant and glowing with it, and utterly lovely to behold.

Castiel says, softly enough that only Dean can hear: “I’m going to ravish you.”

Dean swallows the mouthful of wine with a gulp. “What?”

“What?”

Dean raises an eyebrow. “Is that what you’ve been meditating on?”

“Ssshh, wedding wine.” Castiel delicately finishes up his glass and returns it to Anna with a smile. “Thank you.”

The ceremony may be over but they have full day ahead, the most immediate task of which is getting back into the house to change for that first dance they’ve been practicing, but Dean takes the lull after the wine to hook Castiel’s arm and draw him close. “Just admit that you missed me,” Dean says.

“I missed you,” Castiel replies.

Dean nods, perfectly satisfied. “Well hey, I love you, too. In case you were wondering.”

Castiel puts a hand on Dean’s chest, just above his left pec where Dean’s hunter tattoo has a new single wing inked to its side. “No, I wasn’t wondering.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a [masterpost for this series over on tumblr!](#)

Thank you to all the wonderful people that helped make this story happen, and to everyone that followed it through to its conclusion. It's been an absolute blast, and wouldn't have been possible if y'all didn't make it so dang fun.

This is definitely the end of this story, and the next "chapter" are merely author's notes and explanations of ideas and plot points that were dropped or changed along the way. There are some timestamps in this 'verse on my to-do list, but those will be posted separately, eventually, I hope.

Author's notes

Hello! This is not a new chapter. Not Part of the Plan is done, and was concluded with the epilogue. *This* is an extended author's notes plus commentary plus imaginary FAQ, which was originally going to be posted on tumblr, but tumblr has for some unfathomable reason blanked out some of my old text posts and no way am I going to let that happen to these notes, so I am posting here for posterity.

First of all hey, almost three years as a WIP, now completed! Again, thank you to readers who followed me on that journey and shared feedback that was very useful in shaping up the story in its final form. But also thank you to readers who came in once it's done and wrapped up, hi! I'm writing down my thoughts on that journey here because I thought it'd be fun to look back on the series as a whole.

Where did the series idea come from?

It's been long enough that I can't remember the exact origins, but I think it was a combination of three things:

First, my love for writing first meetings between Dean and Cas in AUs. If I could get away with it I'd write nothing but first meetings, really. So I wrote a rom-com-ish first meeting in a bar, but I thought it'd be fun to tack on a twist at the end, where Cas is actually engaged to Sam. What happens next? I did not know.

Second, I'd been thinking about a royal marriage AU between Dean and Cas where it goes really badly, with betrayals and misunderstandings and angry pining. This idea was supposed to take place in a medieval setting instead of a modern one, but the thought of writing a long AU in that setting stressed me out. So I transferred most of those ideas into Not Part of the Plan's contemporary setting, while other ideas (especially the deeper betrayals and bitterness) ended up going into another shorter WIP I'm writing at the moment, Womb Kindred.

Third, on a meta level I've wanted to try to write a WIP for a while. I've done short fics, remixes, and Big Bangs, but a WIP is a completely different beast, and I was curious about what that would feel like, especially in trying to incorporate reader feedback into an on-going story, while previous chapters are "fixed" once they're posted. When I wrote 1 Night Stand (that first part of Not Part of the Plan) I realized that hey, now's my chance.

Why post as separate stories in a series instead of a single story?

The main reason is that this way sets mini-goals for myself and makes the project manageable. By breaking the story into parts and fleshing out each part only as I get to it, I could "trick" myself into only focusing on finishing that part, instead of feeling overwhelmed about a series I hadn't fully mapped out yet.

At the same time, the series does feel like it's segmented into distinct parts (the honeymoon part, conflict part, the separation part, etc.) that are connected, rather than a single continuous whole. I take heart in it being common for novels to be segmented into parts similarly.

How far ahead was it planned?

I mostly tinkered ahead by two parts at any given moment, i.e. when I was writing Takes 2 I was figuring out Elephant 3 and 4 Point Landing, and when I was writing Elephant 3, I was figuring out 4 Point Landing and Capital 5. It's just enough planning ahead that I could set the pieces for what was coming, such as paving the way for Michael's betrayal, and having Dean and Cas talk about the radio in Elephant 3 to prepare for Dean's pirate radio station in Capital 5, among other things.

I think you can tell in retrospect, but Takes 2 up until Capital 5 were all structurally figured out before I started writing them, in terms of how many chapters they'll need and what happens in each chapter. (People following the WIP as it posted might have noticed that I had the chapter numbers for those parts listed out from the get-go.) But from 6 Degrees onward I was truly winging it -- there was so much going on and I had only a goal to work to, but little idea how to get there. I feel that the series is less tight from that point because there was less planning on my part, and I was just going with the emotions that had built up in the characters at that point.

Some worldbuilding things!

These are some details I've shared before on tumblr over the course of posting this series as a WIP. Not much of this is used in the fic itself, but it's what I figured out as background info to help me with motivations and stuff.

(1) AGES -

Castiel's age is mentioned in the fic, but how old are Dean and Sam? I avoided mentioning their ages at all so you can imagine it however you like, but in my head I have them at their season 1 ages, i.e. Sam is 22 and Dean is 26. That said, the mental image of Castiel making out with freshbb!Dean kind of makes me want to cry a little, so I mostly visualized Dean at his season 4 physicality (29).

(2) THE ROYAL FAMILY -

The order of closeness to the throne is Michael the Elder > Michael the Younger > [Lucifer] > Raphael > Raphael's unmentioned daughter > Gabriel > a couple more cousins > Naomi > a whole lot more cousins > Uriel > [Anna] > Castiel > Balthazar.

Lucifer and Anna are in [brackets] because they're both exiles and technically out of the running. Michael is a widower and has only the one son, Michael the Younger, who's in his early teens. At the end of the story Naomi is regent and Michael the Elder has been

“encouraged” to take an early retirement, so Michael the Younger is technically king, but he doesn’t get to actually do anything until he turns 21, which is more than enough time for Naomi to overhaul the system.

Michael the Elder and Raphael are half-brothers from the same father. Raphael is fiercely loyal to Michael and was mentioned as being regent while Michael was busy with his invasion. He, too, is in retirement by the end of the story. As for Gabriel, he’s Michael’s first cousin, and their parents are siblings. I didn’t get to explore this further, but Gabriel’s been absent from court for years because of his rejection of the system, but Naomi manages to get him involved in the uprising against Michael by using Castiel’s rebellion as inspiration, and Gabriel provides the crucial vote to take the crown away from Michael. In the story, this was only mentioned briefly by Lucifer.

Female monarchs are also referred to as Kings. (While in Joshua House, Dean and Castiel watch a movie about a female King Raphael, one of Michael’s ancestors.)

(3) THE KINGDOM VS. THE REPUBLIC

The northern kingdom does not have a name because it does not need one. Six hundred years and earlier, there was just the Kingdom, and all its lands were ruled by the King. The kingdom is made up of an archipelago of fertile and magic-rich islands, while the large landmass spread to the south (i.e. the continent) was wild forest land inhabited by monsters. As the human population boomed and spread out, some moved south to start new settlements, though they were generally insignificant to the kingdom because of the sheer danger of living on the continent. But human beings are resilient, and hunting/hunters came about as a powerful and respected profession, and with their united strength and intelligence, more and more of the continent started to be inhabited by people.

Three hundred years after that, physical separation from the kingdom meant the people of the continent were forming their own identity. Villages became towns became cities, they developed their own form of government, and shit went down when they declared they’re not interested about being ruled by a faraway King. The Republic is born, there’s fighting and stuff, and the Wall gets put up to separate the kingdom from this new unholy breakaway nation-state. Technically, the ruling King *still* has jurisdiction over the Republic and considers all lands part of their domain, but them’s only words (hence Michael’s desire to reclaim the continent, which is his “inheritance”). By this time Hunters have been absorbed into the Republic’s executive arm, and answer to the ruling Council.

There are other smaller nation-states in this world, though they are located in obscure locations and not relevant to the story. A great deal of the continent is still untamed wilderness, where Lucifer was banished after he rebelled. In the earlier chapters there were mentions of border disputes, and this was referring to the borders the Republic has with this wilderness, which is a hot topic re: expansion of the Republic.

The Republic’s government centers around the Council, which sits at the top of the pyramid and has majority members from the noble Houses, so they’re the only ones mentioned as having any clout in the story. The House system is a carry-over from the House system that exists in the kingdom, where nobility pass down their title, wealth and social standing through their family, and though the continental people say it’s Totally Different omg, the

class system is alive and well. The Speaker is an equivalent of a President/Prime Minister, where they're rotated from members of the Council every few years by internal vote. Samuel Campbell was once a Speaker, but that was when Mary and John were estranged from the rest of the family. Dean was a wee kid at the time, so he doesn't remember much about it beyond sometimes having to dress up when they see Grandma Deanna. Dean's dislike of cameras may have started early.

As for religion, it is known that (a) God exists, or at least once existed and created everything. Dean, who isn't the religious type, accepts that there was deity involved at one point, though he is of the school of thought that He checked out ages ago, so why bother? The majority of people in both nations still pray or have some aspect of devotion in their lives, and the majority of marriages, births and death rites are religious in nature. As with the split of the two nations, the expression of religion has developed differently — the kingdom relies a lot on the belief that the King is God's representative, so the reigning monarch dictates the hows and whys of religious practices (hence it can change from monarch to monarch), while the Republic has somewhat streamlined their religion using old texts brought over from the kingdom, and they've happily split belief in God away from belief in the King. The major devotional buildings are the temples, and a number of great buildings have private temples for personal use. The greatest temple of all for the orthodox northern kingdom is, naturally, the King's Palace.

By the way, a small detail I've seen people wonder about is: why are Dean and Cas barefoot during their wedding? This is a borrowed detail from the coronation of kings and queens in some real world western kingdoms of olden times (though it may also be prevalent in other cultures I know less about), where the monarch would walk barefoot into the church to receive their crown. The way I figure, royal weddings in this fic's universe are closely related to coronations, so these guys get to be barefoot as well.

(4) MAGIC AND TECH

Magic exists in this universe, but it is unremarkable and a normal facet of everyday life. I know I didn't feature it as much as I should have, but basically it was never a priority to me. Most practices of magic are secular, but some are religious, such as the marriage binding process. The continent's Men of Letters organization is an off-shoot of the kingdom's Alchemy Guild, which is definitely a religious body. But in tying its identity to helping the Hunters and the safety/development of the Republic, the Men of Letters became secular, and answers to the Council. In being a master of alchemy, Castiel is, in some ways, a monk.

In terms of tech, my baseline of their level of technology is that it's comparable to our 1970s/1980s, so there's video tapes and telegrams, and no commercial internet or cellphones. Trains and ships are common and in widespread use, though planes less so, because they never really took off commercially. Dean would be happy, if he knew what he was missing.

I know there are lots of things (not limited to worldbuilding-related) that could have been explored further or used more, but that's the tricky part about writing a WIP, in that I slipped

in a lot of things early that I thought would be useful later, but I overshot myself and ended up using maybe only about half. I'm not going to point those things out, but I will talk some about story things that changed along the way. I'll also spell out some things I find hilarious, which is self-indulgent but what can you do.

Let's go part by part.

1 Night Stand and Takes 2 were small pieces that were put down pretty easily by tapping into my love of tropes. I hadn't even figured out fully the world or backstory yet when I was writing them. Takes 2 is especially brief when you consider how detailed the later parts are, but at the time I was trying to get the story going quickly because I wanted to get to the honeymoon portion ASAP.

Here's a thing in Takes 2 that cracked me up when I wrote it:

"I can't undo the situation we're in," Castiel says. "But I can make it as painless for you as is in my power."

This is, Castiel realizes, the closest to an actual proposal that he'll ever make in his lifetime.

NOPE, YOU ARE WRONG.

Elephant Makes 3

This is my favourite portion of the series, because there's all the awkwardness of their getting to know each other, plus a little dread about what's happening outside the house. The setpieces in this part happened pretty much exactly the way I intended (watching movies, cooking, dinner date, theatre, Dean's escape), but the characters themselves changed as the story went along. I had wanted Dean and Cas to still be closed off to each other by the last chapter, but as I wrote it down it felt more natural for both of them to open up. Basically, when I started this part I thought that this would be the Good Getting to Know You portion of their relationship, with 4 Point Landing being the Bad Getting to Know You portion, and they only start to open their hearts honestly in Capital 5. This got derailed in a big way, so instead Dean and Cas already opened up to each other in *this* part, so 4 Point Landing ended up being the relationship crisis portion of their journey.

What made me nervous for this section is that Dean and Cas were preparing for their debut at Michael's court, so naturally there were comments from readers looking forward to that debut, which was never going to happen (eep). To kind of mitigate that, I added scenes in 4 Point Landing onwards that hint at the kind of things they *might* have expected at Michael's court, eg. their tea performance and interview in 4 Point Landing, and Castiel holding court in 6 Degrees. I also toyed with the idea of Dean and Cas visiting Naomi's new Regency court in an epilogue, but by the end I was too tired to contemplate figuring out a whole new setting with a whole bunch of new characters, so that didn't happen.

This part also sets the stage for a lot of Dean & Castiel's relationship growth, in the sense that this part is the Before and everything else will be compared against it as the After. For example, in Elephant 3 there's this scene:

They eat in silence. The pizza has been warmed up, though the crusts are not as firm as they'd been last night. Dean picks out the pineapple from the slices before he eats; Castiel is tempted to take them from himself but he feels that would be too intimate.

But four parts later in 7th Day:

Dean bites his way free of the pastry he'd just sunk his teeth in, and gingerly holds it at a distance. "Coconut, ugh. Okay, not that one."

"Don't waste food. Give it to me." Dean skeptically hands the pastry over, and Castiel takes a grim bite before turning his attention back to Ellen.

Also in Elephant 3, Castiel and Dean are exchanging thoughts about marriage, and Dean said that he felt marriage was "irrelevant" to him and he knows that there should be some excuse for it like maybe someone broken his heart, and Castiel replies:

"Sure, maybe someone did break your heart. Or maybe you broke someone else's heart. Or maybe both your hearts were broken for reasons beyond your control, and you're keeping a... a bookmark of sorts inside you, just in case you can find a way to return to them."

Cas is just throwing out examples, but he happens to also be describing exactly what happens to Dean later, after their 4 Point Landing separation, DUN DUN DUN.

4 Point Landing

I think this one changed the most out of all parts. I had envisioned it being far *far* angstier than the version that got posted.

There is a scene in 4 Point Landing where Bobby tries to interrogate Castiel. The way I had originally envisioned it, that interrogation would have ended poorly, but then *Dean* would come in to take over, talking to Cas coolly and trying to get information out of him about Michael. This was the point when Castiel would realize that Dean viewed him as a potential enemy because of Michael's suspicious activities, and Castiel would be forced to face Dean as an opponent. Castiel's mental line "*Castiel knows this game. If they want to play, they can play*" was originally supposed to be about *Dean*, not Bobby. It would've been super duper angsty and deepen the rift between them, and they'd both see a side of each other they hadn't seen before.

UNFORTUNATELY I didn't get to write those interrogation scenes at all, because what happened is that the last two chapters of Elephant 3 ended up bringing out a much more conflicted, passionate Dean than I expected, and that Dean translated forward into the events of 4 Point Landing. The final Dean we got clumsily comforted Cas over his jealousy with

Liz, and this Dean tried to convince Cas to run away with him... so this Dean could not turn into antagonist in 4 Point Landing I wanted him to be. So instead we got sad panda Dean who's trying to make the best out of a bad situation but no one believes him.

Hence the ending of 4 Point Landing changed as well. My original vision for the ending was gonna be another super angsty thing where, after they escape Michael's ship, Castiel would realize that Dean cannot return to his people without Castiel, because then they'd view him as having betrayed them. So to save Dean from having to make a difficult decision, Castiel was going to use the "sleep, husband" instruction to make Dean pass out. (In this earlier version, Castiel hadn't broken the concubine binding at that point.) To make that bit even angstier, Cas was going to do it after telling Dean he loves him, and when Dean goes " *What?* " that's when Cas covers his mouth and uses the command to render Dean unconscious. The description for this bit ended up being used earlier in the chapter when Cas makes Dean collapse in the camp.

But I scrapped that ending, because again Dean was far less angry to justify it, plus Castiel's headspace was completely wrong for a love confession at that point. It also felt more organic for their parting to be a relatively respectful one (instead of one Castiel took by force), because I'd ended up highlighting Castiel's history of captivity throughout this part, plus back at the end of Elephant 3 they had that argument about what loves means (holding on to someone vs. letting them go), and to my delight I found this to be a natural point where Dean could show emotional growth by letting Castiel go.

Mary was also going to have a bigger role in this part. She was going arrive towards the end of the interrogations, and unlike Dean (who believed he had been manipulated by Cas), Mary would be more astute and realize that Cas had developed real feelings for Dean, and she'd try to use those feelings against him. Basically I wanted to use Mary as a mirror to Michael in terms of manipulation of Cas, but that ended up making her too aggressive, so she was taken out of that sequence entirely. Most of Mary's accusing dialogue was transferred to Victor, Bobby and Ellen towards Cas. And because Dean had changed so much, it made less sense to have Mary as another antagonist there as well.

Another thing I was really attached to but had to be dropped due to all these changes is that Castiel's captivity was supposed to be longer, and he was supposed to be dragged from location to location by Dean's party as they tried to avoid Michael closing in on them. I wanted a scene where the group is in a mess hall or tavern having a meal, and Cas is eating at a table by himself while being monitored by his guard (maybe Victor), while Dean and the rest of his friends are chilling nearby. Cas would have the chance to observe Dean interacting with his friends, and he would realize that Dean acts very differently with them than he did when he was alone with Castiel, and Cas would come to the erroneous conclusion that everything he had with Dean during their honeymoon was an act. There was going to be a line of dialogue where someone would tease Dean for having to act like a loving husband, pretending to enjoy all those domestic things, and Dean would go *HAHA yes of course, I don't like all that stupid shit*, and Cas would duck his head over his meal and silently conclude that he doesn't know Dean at all. All that's left of this sequence is the brief scene in Turner House where Castiel looks out Ellen's window and sees Dean talking with people. I am bummed to have lost all this lovely lovely angst, but them's the breaks.

Capital 5 FM

This is a lull in the story where Dean and Cas are separated, but ended up being vital for both of them changing and becoming better prepared to reconnect in 6 Degrees. Dean especially has used this time to give up caring what people think about him, and although I know it's a cheat to have it happen off-screen, I think it works in context of Cas' POV.

Among the things that didn't make the final cut of this part is a subplot about xenophobia in Rexford, where the locals would react angrily to northerners who pass through the town, necessitating Anna and perhaps Cas getting involved while trying to keep their northern origins secret. I bailed on this because I didn't think I could do it justice within context of Cas' headspace (he's detached and unhappy for most of this part), so all that's left is Dean's asking in one of his radio shows for his listeners be open-minded.

Castiel also was supposed to start using his alchemy and spellwork skills in this part to help people, but whenever I tried to bring that up, it just didn't make sense because Cas is supposed to be keeping himself hidden. It seemed an unnecessary risk considering his fears, and I was already having trouble making it seem plausible that Cas and Anna would take other risks that were necessary to the story -- especially the traveling out of town, which would lead them to Sam.

I had also wanted a scene where Cas gets to watch a video of his final interview with Dean at Ilchester, the one that gets multiple callbacks with Nora and later Dean's magazine clipping. I wanted Cas to watch the interview and freeze-frame at That Moment of Dean's face, and being utterly confused why Dean would look at him like that. Unfortunately I couldn't figure how Cas would have access to a video, since Anna is pissed at what Cas went through and wouldn't record any of it, and Nora *might* record it but that would necessitate figuring out a way for Cas to go to Nora's house to watch it. All that's left is Nora showing Cas a clipping of that interview, which got the confusion across at least.

Another scene I really wanted was for Cas to travel out of Rexford to see the Winchester home for himself, as part of his trying to figure out who Dean "really" is. It was going to be Castiel's Tour of Dean Winchester History, where he would try to make sense of all the things Dean told him during their honeymoon and try to figure out if those stories were true or fake. I was also reverse engineering Castiel's encounter with Sam, because it felt plausible that Sam would try to find comfort at the Winchester house after fleeing from Lucifer, and Cas would see him there. But as I got closer it was already difficult to make it plausible that Cas would even leave Rexford in first place, so to take the additional *huge* risk of going to the Winchester house? Yeah, it made no sense. It was gone, and replaced with an encounter with Sam that was based more on luck.

6 Degrees in Either Direction and And on the 7th Day...

I mentioned earlier that I didn't have a planned structure for these two parts, and I was only using a loose guideline of Things That Must Happen and stitching events together as it went

along. Among the major Things That Must Happen over these two parts are:

- Cas needs to move away from thinking Dean will always choose his family over him. Dean's actions need to convince him.
- Cas cannot be fully dependent on Dean for his well-being. Cas needs to have his own support system and goals.
- Cas has been used his entire life and Dean has been expected to adhere to certain expectations. Both are to rise above this.

The above aren't plotty things though, they're emotional things, which made it trickier in trying to get them to play out. Because of that, I forced myself to focus on these points of growth in Dean & Castiel's relationship, and drop anything plotty that wasn't serving that, or would take too long to explain. For that purpose a lot of things were truncated. Below are some of those ideas that got dropped!

I wanted way more sexual frustration for these guys. Like *way* more almost-encounters and heavy breathing and interruptions before they get it on. I failed.

I really really *really* couldn't find a way for Castiel to learn more about that moment where Dean believed he'd lost Castiel and tried to burn off his tattoo. Frankly, once Dean found Castiel again he would much prefer to forever erase that moment from memory, and Benny's too much of a good friend to share something of Dean's without his permission. The closest I got was to have Lucifer tease Castiel about it. I might explore this in a timestamp, we'll see.

Meg disappears from the story after she's arrested, but I wanted to put her in a subplot where she escapes from Harvelle Tower and wreaks havoc for Dean and Cas, trying to ruin their reputation and to make it seem that Cas is a dangerous usurper, which would make Castiel's followers second-guess his honesty and force Michael (and later Naomi) to deal with Cas aggressively. I had to drop this because I felt there were too many players and points of view to deal with, so another one would just make it harder to track.

I also wanted more details about Sam's time with Lucifer's party, plus a freaking mention of Ruby because naturally it was Ruby who recruited Sam to the rebellion. This would lead into what's going on with Samuel and the rest of the Campbell clan, and what the fallout has been since they technically betrayed their country but were brought back into "good" graces for expedients sake (which does happen a lot). Again, would take too long to explain.

A minor one, but I wanted a scene where Castiel discovers that Dean has been keeping the letter he wrote him in Capital 5, but functionally the emotion of such a discovery was covered in the scene where Cas found the magazine clipping of his face in Dean's jacket, so it would've been repetitive.

There was going to be more about the divide between people who believe that Dean and Castiel's love story is 100% true, and those among Castiel's followers who now believe (thanks to Lucifer) that the love story was fake. It could've been interesting to explore that but it would've made things needlessly complicated what with the occupation going on at the same time, plus the characters whose opinions *do* matter (Mary & John, Anna, Charlie, Victor, Hannah, Ellen, etc.) have already been covered -- all already know Dean & Cas are the real thing, and that's enough.

I may have shrieked the first time I got a comment guessing that Castiel might become king, because it came *before* I posted the chapter where Lucifer revealed that that was a possibility. (YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE.) That Castiel-becoming-king is something I'd had at the back of my mind since Elephant 3, but I also knew Castiel was never going to *actually* become king. It was supposed to be a plausible fate that gets rejected, and part of another layer of the expectations that people mistakenly put on Castiel because of their misunderstanding of who he is and what he wants.* I wanted to drag this out further towards the end of 7th Day by having Castiel pretend he really wanted to become king to frighten Naomi and force her to accept their divorce, but by then I was getting very tired by all the external machinations and just wanted to focus on Castiel & Dean fully reclaiming their relationship by speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth, which y'all might've noticed Castiel hasn't done since the very first part when he lied to Dean about his name.

*Plus Cas would be a terrible king. Dean would make an awesome king consort, though.

Epilogue

Around the time I was writing Elephant 3 I decided that the series would end with their divorce, because it made sense to me that the story would follow the arc of their (first) marriage from start to finish. However, when I was about halfway writing 7th Day, I realized that I had once again decided on an ending that's satisfying to *me* as a writer and perhaps less so for the reader. (I keep doing this!) And I kinda got more nervous the closer the story got to the divorce, because I realized I'd be opening myself up to angry/dismayed responses, so I decided that hey, maybe an epilogue with their next wedding would smooth things over. So, an epilogue *wasn't* part of my original plan, but ended being added because of my nervousness.

Of course, then the chapter with the divorce was posted and I *didn't* get a bevy of angry/sad comments, which confused me a little -- but in a good way! <3

The epilogue, while very fun, was also kinda tricky to write because I had a whole bunch of things I wanted to cover within a very compact space, plus like two dozen callbacks to various things that happened over the series. Most final episodes of TV shows do this, shoving in as much closure and references into as short a time as possible and it's usually very clunky, but I had to do it anyway. We've got Cas and John having a moment; Dean replacing the destroyed bracelet of 4 Point Landing with a wedding circlet; Dean and Cas now embracing the cameras; Cas still keeping up his friendships with Nora, Hannah and others; plus there's a mention of Dean and Castiel dancing for their wedding (where Dean's totally letting Cas dip him, by the way) and so on.

But there were still bits that got dropped! Balthazar ended up just being mentioned instead of having an appearance, because it didn't feel right to introduce a new character just as the story is wrapping up. I also didn't get to talk more about Castiel's new work... I did mention that he has alchemy workshops, but he's also acting as a kingdom ambassador/spokesperson in the Republic, which Anna is helping him with, but Castiel considers that less important than his alchemy work, which is why it didn't get mentioned.

By the way, throughout the series I made a point of Castiel not once referring to anywhere as his “home” -- not his apartment, the kingdom, Anna’s cottage, or anywhere else. The first time he uses the term for himself is in the epilogue. ♥

Artwork and things!

To my excitement and gratitude, Not Part of the Plan has inspired other fanworks. I've linked to some of these before in earlier chapters, but I wanted to compile them together and show them off! I also referred back to these when I needed inspiration to keep writing, so they're all pretty much part of a feedback loop of creativity.

lacierva did some [gorgeous book covers](#) for the first five parts of this series (it was posted while Capital Five FM was still ongoing).

nunubunkie drew fanart of [Dean and Castiel's wedding](#) (the first one), and I may have gone back to refer to this piece when I was writing their second wedding in the epilogue.

phonevibrates did fanart of [Castiel being bad-ass using his alchemy powers](#) in Elephant in the Room Makes Three. I feel a wee bit bad that we don't get to see this side of Castiel more, so I made a point of making sure Castiel got his one-up moments later in

cloudsiterations drew fanart for the [intimate dinner date scene](#) in Elephant in the Room Makes Three. Getting carried away with the moment there, guys.

nappi drew fanart of Castiel in his [hot lumberjack mode](#) of Capital Five FM. Dean is sad he missed this phase.

wisepuma commissioned tacogrande to draw Castiel in his [glamorous Gas-n-Sip get up](#). Very fashionable!

livinginthequestion wrote a possible future timestamp for these guys: [Spring on the Farm](#). It was written while And on the Seventh Day was still posting and it refers to a whole bunch of things set up in the series and posits their own resolution. I'm just delighted that she couldn't wait to imagine a happy ending. Consider this an AU of this AU!

That's it, and thank you for reading!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!