

Cinderic

Author: CK

Rating: P6

Summary: It's an age-old tale. Boy loses his parents. Boy is literally enslaved by his step-family. Boy goes to a dance at the castle and meets the future king. Boy and future king fall in love. We all know the story. ...don't we?

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Author's Note: Once upon a time, there was an idea for a short one shot... then the story developed a mind of its own and it took me ages to finish it. I suppose though in the face of the show ending, we all need a little fairytale...

I've taken inspiration from the original Disney animated movie, the live action movie from 2015, as well as a little bit from "Ever After" with Drew Barrymore.

Every once in a while, a fairytale is retold.

Every other of these fairy tales, told anew, adds a little twist to an old and well-known story.

This is the story of a prince that fell in love with a maid. But not the maid you may think of now.

Our story begins in a far away kingdom. As fairy tales go, it was the state of a proud and just king, a fierce and benevolent queen, and their two sons - one handsome and thick-headed, one curious and quiet.

Prince Dean the Brave, heir to the throne, and Prince Samuel the Literate, his younger brother, were, and this our esteemed reader has to know, orphans. While King Robert and Queen Ellen were parents to the princes in every way possible, they weren't by blood. But as they had been closely affiliated with the royal family and chosen as caretakers for the sons should the need arise long before tragedy overcame the beloved, no one dared to protest this simple Duke and Duchess' rise to the throne for the time being until Dean was going to be old enough to become the new ruler of the kingdom.

It was an event that left everyone shocked when aforementioned need did arise. It was the night of a terrible fire that took away the boys' mother, the kindhearted Queen Mary, and drove their father, King John, into insanity and finally death.

Robert and Ellen didn't hesitate to make good on their promise and take over caring for the princes, intent on raising them to be good and just men without prejudices and disregard towards anyone.

It was a simple enough task also, easy to fulfill. Queen Mary's liberal heart and mind had never allowed for her children to let their thoughts stray into the territory of the narrow-minded, even if King John didn't always approve fully of the way the princes treated their servants almost as equals. But Ellen and Robert were as free and generous in their thinking and doing as had Mary been; granting the brothers the liberty to keep the legacy and thus memory of their mother alive.

The princes' loss shook the whole kingdom.

The loss yet another young boy, not even a year older than the heir to the throne, had to suffer rarely anyone cared about. But for that one boy it was without comparison.

Cedric had grown up a content child. Even his father's death when he was only a toddler didn't shake his world too much; he had, after all, still his mother Naomi, a stern yet loving woman, and as advanced of mind as the

first Queen herself. She taught her son how statuses were what people cared for, but he should never be bothered by; she taught him how, while some people would treat him differently from others, he'd always be exactly as good and worthy as he believed and trusted himself to be.

And it proved to be an important lesson also, as it were these words of his mother's, anchored in his heart, that kept Cedric alive, in more ways than one.

The same year Queen Mary died, Naomi succumbed to an unknown travel sickness that had befallen her on a journey she also met her second husband and his two daughters on. As overjoyed as Cedric was when his mother returned with a new love he hoped was going to bring her the sort of happiness he knew she yearned for again, as devastated he was when everything fell apart under the vicious sickness' grip, only a month after their return home.

Lord Angus Crowley was a gallant man; or so it seemed. In the days after Naomi's death, he was nothing if not a caring stepfather. But a few weeks after his mother's passing Cedric began to notice changes; first in his stepsisters' behavior, then in that of Lord Crowley himself.

As it turned out, Rubina and Megan, who were quite easy on the eyes, but also just as light in the head, had truly demonic souls inhabiting both of them. And they apparently had inherited it from their father. A father who began to demand Cedric to work alongside the household staff and earn his living in a house that had been his home since the day he was born; who expected the boy to pay for being taken care of by the lord, even if that care was merely a lasting feeling of just being tolerated. Like one would tolerate a fly whirring around one's meal - because it was too much effort to try and squash the fly.

Soon enough, Cedric's only friend remained his faithful dog Balt - short for Balthazar - a middle-aged canine with short-cropped graying hairs and love for any dog lady close by. He was also the only one listening to the boy who was slowly growing into a young man as he fulfilled the household tasks Lord Crowley had him do. With all the maid and the cook gone, having been let go by Crowley to save money, the boy became a servant and prisoner in his own home - and it was just because of his mother's words and teachings that he never gave up.

The days went by, filled by the same routine. That was, until one morning, a knock resounded through the entry hall of the manor house...

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The loud rapping of the metal knocker on the heavy wooden door made Cedric look up in shock from where he was kneeling on and cleaning the floor. Quickly he got up, almost stumbling in his haste, scared he might get reprimanded if he took too long to answer the door. He wiped his hands on the apron he was wearing and hurried over to the entrance, pulling it open - only to fall immediately to his knees when he recognized the royal advisor.

"Milady, I must apologize for my appearance. How may I be of service?" Cedric didn't hesitate to show his respects, well aware of what he was expected to do in the presence of royalty, no matter what he had been taught about equality.

"I have an invitation that is to be passed on to every young man and woman of age for marriage," the advisor, a woman known as Lady Jodene Mills, announced. She briefly stopped talking when the Lord and his daughters came down the stairs, inelegantly tripping over their own feet, before she elaborated, "The crown prince will choose a spouse soon and tomorrow evening, a ball will be held to present every suitable young woman and man of the lands to him. An appearance is mandatory for every bachelor, regardless their social status. Good day." And with that, she was gone.

Cedric didn't even need to turn around to know of his step-family's excitement. Even before the door was fully closed on a leaving Lady Mills, squealing sounds could be heard from Rubina and Megan. Of course was the girls' and Crowley's desire to become part of the royal family a prominent theme in the household; they saw themselves more than deserving of royalty and wealth coming with the title they'd earn.

"My dears, it appears that it is time to get out your finest dresses. We want to impress the prince, do we not?"

More squealing was the answer, and turning his back on them, Cedric rolled his eyes. They were his family and he was supposed to love and cherish them, for they gave him a home. At least that was what he told himself time and again. But did he quite believe it? No. They were evil spirits, that much they had proven over and over in the years since they had moved into this house, claimed it as theirs even though it wasn't. Not to Cedric's mind, at least; may his dear mother and Crowley have been married, it had only been for the shortest time. That really shouldn't give this devil any right to take away the young man's home from him.

Cedric's willingness to continuously accept them as they were with an open heart and mind was diminishing with every day. His mother's teachings he would never forget; but surely she had never meant or wanted for him to be a slave in his own home.

Strengthened by these thoughts, he faced the three once more and announced, "I understand that this means I will go to the ball as well."

Silence settled upon the hall, where before there had been sounds equal to that of an agitated flock of birds reverberating between the walls. This wonderfully tranquil silence however didn't last all that long. Evil laughter chased it away when the Lord and his daughters had passed Cedric's words through their little minds.

"*You* want to go?" Crowley sneered, looking down his nose at his stepson, head held high and shoulders pushed back, as if to rise himself above such a silly idea the boy had provided. "Why bother wasting your time where no one will even notice you, unless it is if they need someone to clean something up?" At that, the sisters laughed again, sounding like neighing horses; and coming from two young girls, it was a gruesome sound.

"I believe the invitation was directed at every member of a household. Am I not a part of this household and family?" Curiously enough, Crowley didn't have to think too long to answer that question.

"Certainly you are. And as such it should be well in your interest that this house is represented properly. I assume we agree that there mustn't be any unfavorable regard to it. Just look at you, clothes and hair full of cinder, your face smeared with black - shall we present you as Cedric Prince of Cinder then?"

"Cinderic!" Rubina cackled, and Megan shared her malicious glee when both sisters crossed their arms over their chests and threw back their hair in perfect synchronicity. Crowley, too, smirked at that, but quickly resumed his mock earnestness.

The younger man was not willing to let the others see how much their nastiness hurt him; but then, in some ways, it also didn't, because he knew the evil within them was fed by a deep unhappiness, for they didn't have any true joys in their lives. It was all about social standing, money and esteem for them. The little things of everyday life Cedric and many of those he knew found contentment in, like a beautiful sunset, the song of a bird, or the fragrance of wild flowers in a wide field, those girls and their father had no admiration for. He shouldn't hate them; if anything, they were worth of his pity.

"The invitation," Cedric began, not even sparing a glance at his stepsisters, "as well as Lady Jodene Mills herself said that every single bachelor of the kingdom has to appear, no matter their social status. Therefore forbidding me to go would be dismissing a direct order by the king." It was a brave retaliation, given while standing as tall as it was possible for him. And he really wasn't a small young man; in fact, he even dwarfed Angus.

Something appeared on Lord Crowley's face; something deeply wicked, masked by a seemingly sweet smile, and it turned Cedric's stomach. He had seen such an expression, and similar ones, much too often.

"Nothing could be further from my wishes than to forbid my only son to attend such an official and important evening. You will understand, of course, that this mustn't relieve you of your duties. Fulfill them all by tomorrow evening, and after that you will of course be free to go to the ball."

"Yes, my Lord."

"And Cedric?"

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to wash and iron the laundry. There are also the dishes to be done. And naturally it will not come as a surprise or chore to you that my daughters will need your help dressing, as well as with their hair and makeup."

"But... if I do all this... there'll be no time for me to get ready, or go to the ball," Cedric protested, already knowing that it would be futile.

"I believe I have made myself clear. The household has to be first priority. Just imagine a visitor coming by and this house not being presentable. Even the prince or king himself could be our guests, especially after the evening tomorrow." Taking a step closer to Cedric, Lord Crowley continued conspiratorially, "You are very important. You should feel honored, as you will play an integral part in preparing this house and family to become members of the royal court."

"Oh yes. Imagine your name becoming part of the royal history. Helping us. Cinderic the Assiduous," Megan chimed in, and was silently congratulated on the remark by her sister, who added, "Assiduously collecting every last bit of cinder, grime and dust in the house, using his entire body."

With what little of dignity and self-control he could muster, Cedric ignored the stinging tongues of his stepsisters and addressed Angus once more.

"I understand, my lord. I will get to it right away." With that he turned and left the hall, worried he might say something unforgivable if he stayed any longer. And he had good reason to be afraid of that - after all did the three others immediately start snickering as soon as they believed him out of sight and earshot.

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The next hours, going through the evening and night, as well as morning and noon at the day of the ball, became so hectic and full of work that Cedric had barely time to think of the big event, let alone prepare for it. The most of the two hours he'd been granted for sleep he spent going through his parents' possessions that hadn't been thrown away by his step-family, but instead been put out of sight in the attic.

The attic was also the place that had once been declared to be his room, his sleeping quarters. A dusty room full of spider webs, with no heating, right below the repair-worthy roof, bitterly cold in the winter. Cedric had done his best to turn it into something homely, brought everything up the other three wouldn't miss, whether it were blankets or pillows, sheets or clothing; yet, when the cold season came, he oftentimes had to sleep in the kitchen next to the fireplace.

As tired as he was, sleep wasn't what he worried about right then. Instead, he went through every box and chest that stood in the room under the roof, and put together the pieces of clothing that would be his suit for the next evening. There was still a white shirt, black pants and a black tailcoat among his father's clothing; all wrinkled and slightly too big, but Cedric made do with what he had. Having had to learn sewing, he was also quick to use some remainders of fabric from the girl's dresses to make himself a bowtie. Two rather pretty buttons, once deemed useless and not good enough anymore by Crowley's daughters, became his cufflinks. It took him the most of his intended sleep time to tweak and adjust what he had, but in the end, the suit he stood in before an old and half-broken mirror he was quite proud of. As he knew his mother would have been had she seen him like this.

When their cockerel greeted the new day loudly, Cedric was already back in the kitchen, preparing breakfast, feeding the animals, and cleaning up what still had to be tended to.

By early afternoon, he felt confident that he had done everything there was to do in the household, and went to help the sisters prepare for the ball. It was, perhaps, the worst of his chores, much more so than any cleaning up or emptying the latrines could ever be. Dealing with them and their shrill voices had Cedric constantly remind himself what he was doing this for. He would prevail.

After what felt like five times of an eternity in purgatory, the girls were finally ready and the young man ran up to his chamber to get dressed for the ball himself.

When it knocked on the front door, it was, for once, Lord Crowley who opened it, instead of calling for his stepson; not without ulterior motive, one would think.

"Your carriage has arrived, Milord. We will be waiting outside," the servant boy standing in the front yard announced, bowed and turned to go back to the coach.

"Megan, Rubina, are you quiet ready yet? Our carriage is waiting," the Lord yelled loud enough that even Cedric would have been able to hear it in his roof chamber - hadn't he spotted the arrival of their means of transportation to the ball already and been on his way down, dressed up in his suit.

Since his way to the hall was much longer than that of the others, he rushed the last steps down just as the rest of the family was about to walk through the front door.

"Wait, wait for me!" he called out, picking up his pace a bit more yet, until his feet finally, thankfully touched the grand entrance hall's floor and Cedric stopped to take a couple of deep breaths, before continuing for the door.

"My, aren't you a sight to behold," Crowley commented immediately, but there was something strangely malicious in his voice that had the younger man's step slow down a little. "Don't you think so, too, my darlings?"

Megan simply huffed at that. "Oh please, father, he's nothing more than..." She trailed off when her eyes spotted something she definitely didn't seem to like. "Wait, is that... are you wearing *my* pearl buttons?!" She shrieked, and walked quickly up to come to stand before her step-brother, grabbing his arm. "You do! You dirty little thief!" With that, she ripped off said buttons, slinging them far away and glowering at Cedric.

"But... you threw them away, so I assumed you--"

"And your bowtie," Rubina growled, having joined her sister, "that is fabric from *my* dress! How dare you?!"

"It was just the rest--" Cedric once more began to defend himself, but struggled when Rubina tried to pull the accessory off him, but only succeeded in tearing a part of it off. "--the rest of what was left over after the dress was finished!"

"Just like those satin seams?" Megan spat, pointing at the thin ribbon that had been sewn over the outer seams of his trousers, "Now where did you steal those from?!"

"They already were on them, I didn't--" But it was too late - in her wild fury the girl had already ripped the leg of his trouser apart.

"Darlings, darlings, is that the behavior of a future queen?" Crowley eventually decided to end this madness, and indeed his daughters let go of Cedric at once, taking a few steps back. Shocked and heartbroken the young man stood in the middle of the hall, clothes ripped to shreds and strewn across the floor around him. He must have given such a sad picture that he saw sympathy ghosting even over his stepfather's features. But it was gone in the blink of an eye, and replaced by the well-known arrogance and cold.

Looking down on himself, Cedric felt as if he was in a nightmare, and *knew* he was also, but still just couldn't wake up from it.

"But... What am I supposed to wear to the ball now?" he murmured, voice already thick with tears, more to himself.

"Oh but Cedric, look at this mess!" his stepfather exclaimed over-dramatically, "You can't possibly go to the ball before that hasn't been cleaned up. I'm truly sorry, Cedric," and the young man could clearly see that Crowley indeed wasn't, "but as you may remember, we had an understanding." With that he ushered his daughters out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Even though he should have known, Cedric felt betrayed. Something in him, that part carrying the memory of his mother, had, despite all, believed he'd be able to go to the ball.

Now, he instead stood lost and lonely in the middle of the hall, fighting the tears that welled up in his eyes and tightened up his throat. It was not fair. It really, really wasn't. He didn't deserve this. But maybe, for the time being, he had to learn and live with his fate.

His feet carried him through the hall and the sitting room into the garden, to the fountain he had spent so many hours with his mother, and, when he had still been a small boy, his father also at. The water wasn't running anymore, shut down as so many other things in this house because it was too expensive to sustain. Lord Crowley and his daughters spent the family's money in other ways; ways that only served their selfishness and vanity.

Sitting down with a heavy sigh, he angrily brushed the tears, by now flowing freely over his cheeks, away, hating how affected he was by the cruelty that by now was anything but new to him. Still, it hurt. And he assumed it would continue to hurt as long as he had to suffer through the cold-heartedness of those individuals living in his home, and pretending to be his family.

He'd have to be strong. He'd have to be strong for his mother, his father, for their estate his parents had worked hard to make it the home it was now. Had been before his step-family moved in and treated everything with a lack of respect.

Right now, however, being strong seemed such an entirely impossible concept. He had fought for so much, fought so hard to remain decent, friendly, good-hearted and thankful, even for the smallest things; the smallest joys. Still *life*, *fate*, appeared incapable of recognizing his efforts. Or weren't they enough, after all? He didn't ask for much. He never did. He maybe, just maybe, hoped. For something, a little help - a little wonder.

A flurry of golden feathers made Cedric scramble to his feet and take a few cautious steps back, and the sound of wings flapping - enormous wings, from the sounds of it - almost had him flee into the house. That was until he spotted a humanoid figure on the rim of the fountain, its size that of a normal man - as were his looks, Cedric found out when the feathery dust had settled. A strange light from a source the young man couldn't make out illuminated the stranger from behind and gave him an eerie appearance; despite the white pants, embroidered shirt and glittering, knee-long coat he was wearing. Not to speak of the shoes, which were curiously high. And not any less sparkly.

Even though Cedric knew, for some reason, that the stranger was no threat to him, that he could even trust him, he remained suspicious. It was what the past years, what *life* had taught him.

Looking at the man through squinted eyes, he demanded to know, "Who are you?"

"Why, I'm your fairy godmother, of course!" the strange man exclaimed cheerfully, a wide grin on his face; before he frowned and shook his head. "No, sorry, forget that. Of course I'm *not* your *godmother*." With that, he turned his back to Cedric, murmured something, then suddenly whirled around again, throwing a few feathers he apparently had caught earlier into the air, and declared once more, "Why, I'm your fairy *godfather* of course!" After that he remained standing in one spot, and with one stance, with both hands in a presenting gesture stretched to his sides, and looked very pleased with himself.

"Fairy... godfather?"

"That's me, yes. You may call me Master Gabriel." Once again furrowing his forehead, he pulled his mouth into something equal to a pout, before he shrugged, "Or simply Gabe. We fairy godparents are not that formal." He winked at Cedric at that, and the young man reacted with another step back.

"And what do you do?"

Exasperated, Gabe hopped from the fountain's ledge, and in a grand gesture explained, "I'm here to fulfill your dream. Or grant you a wish, whatever phrasing you prefer. Anyways, you wish for something, almost anything, and I will make it happen!" Cedric could have sworn he heard a fanfare right after Gabriel finished.

"Whatever could I wish for?" Cedric huffed, about to turn around and leave the apparent lunatic behind. Same lunatic's voice, however, stopped him, when it muttered something that the young man felt he just had to defend himself against.

"A sense of style, for example?"

"What good is a sense of style when I'm merely a servant?!" He snapped at Gabriel. Immediately he felt sorry; this surely wasn't what his mother had taught him. Luckily, the strange man currently standing in his garden didn't seem to mind.

"Servant? What are you talking about?" Cedric was about to answer, but confusion stopped him when all of a sudden, Gabe conjured up some sort of notebook, and thumbed through it in panic. "You are Cedric, aren't you? Son of Naomi and James Novak? Born and raised in this house, the Sandgate Estate?"

"Yes I am," the young man replied, his anger replaced with resignation when he was reminded who he actually was - a young man of honorable birth. Who was now treated like he was nothing more than dirt under his step-family's shoe.

"Then why do you call yourself a servant?"

"Apparently you are not very well informed in fairyland," Cedric remarked, now daring to take a few steps towards Gabriel. "When my mother died, Lord Crowley, a nobleman she had met on her travels and married shortly before her death, and his daughters didn't leave the house again, but stayed and turned me into their housemaid. I am not of age yet to run my own estate, and I have no other family, so I had to stay with my step-family."

Gabriel opened his mouth and breathed in visibly as if to say something, but either thought the better of it, or simply didn't know how to react to that. For a few moments he looked utterly irritated, before seemingly shaking it off and smiling again.

"So. What do you wish for?"

Cedric didn't have to think long about that. Full of hope he replied, "I wish my parents were still alive and with me, as a normal family." Gabriel's cheerful face crumbled at that - and the young man's heart sunk.

"Oh sweetie, I can't bring anyone back from the dead, I'm sorry," he said quietly, and actually sounded apologetic.

"Can you help me be free of my step family?"

"As you noticed yourself, you're not old enough yet, and even I don't have the power to change the rules of this land."

"How about you make them at least a little nicer?!" Cedric sounded frustrated now, and understandably so.

Again Gabe seemed intent on answering, but apparently couldn't think of something - or maybe thought it wiser not to reply, as he could see in Cedric's face that the boy already knew the answer.

"You know, I thought I could do something more along the lines of, helping you to go to that ball, after all."

"I suppose, if that's the only thing possible..."

"Now, now, look at the bright side - you'll get out a little and meet new people. And meanwhile I'll even see to it that this house shines and sparkles when the step-dragons return, how about that?" Even Cedric had to laugh lightly at that, and nodded in sort-of-defeat.

"Perfect. All right, let's get on with it. We don't have much time and a lot to do and it is not like I can say *bibbidi bobbedy boo* and all will be ready, you know, like in those ridiculous fairytales." Gabe winked at the young man as if they had just shared a private joke; Cedric, however, only frowned.

"I don't understand that reference."

Gabriel sighed. "Never mind."

Whirling around once more, the fairy stalked a few paces away from Cedric, coming to stand in that spot of the courtyard that held the most free space to every side, and began swinging his arms around.

The result was a bright, colorful and chaotic ongoing burst of magic that engulfed everything not quick enough to vanish or flee... as much as static objects would have been able to do that, though Cedric befell a wild notion that some of them probably would have wanted to do just that anyways, alive or not.

Thus a ball - the one of the round, to-play variety - got chosen to be turned into a carriage, while a broken ladder and remnants of a fence became the framework for same transportation, forming a tiny staircase, the seat for the coachman and the holdings for the horse.

Right. Coachman and horse.

Cedric didn't even dare to guess who or what would have to play those roles, but he learned it soon enough when Gabriel's eyes focused on poor old Balthazar. The loyal household dog howled in panic when Gabe, still watching Balt, rubbed his hands and grinned in delight, causing the hound to seek shielding behind Cedric's legs; alas it was too late. The being that came to sit behind its master was not a canine anymore - but now a tall, lean middle-aged man with ash blonde hair and sharp features. Not the worst looking fellow, Cedric had to admit, when he threw a glance over his shoulder.

"Oh, terrific," Balthazar moaned, and instantly clasped his hands over his mouth, obviously shocked by the sound that came out. And that it didn't sound like his usual bark.

"Balt?" Cedric asked slowly, while helping the other man up - and steady him, as standing on two legs apparently wasn't as easy as one would think.

"It seems that I am, yes. Whatever this... this... lunatic has done to me," came the grumbling reply, while the former dog gestured in the general direction of Gabriel.

So his dog was now a man. A human male. Who had a distinct French accent. As if his life couldn't get any weirder.

"Your master needed a coachman, and who better to choose for that than his faithful hound?" Gabe chimed in by way of explanation, and just as quickly turned his attention back to creating the rest of Cedric's entourage, if one could call it that. Several mice rushing past grew into the size - and form - of horses, and a ball of thread lying on one of the windowsills and that came from god-knows-where became same mice-horses' reigns.

The first horse, put up-front and thus leading the other four, was strangely tan-colored - and neighed angrily at Gabriel. Both Cedric and Balthazar were impressed by the horse's mimic skills, as the mount actually looked like it was scowling at the fairy godfather.

With one last look at his creations, Gabriel nodded, a very pleased expression on his face.

"All right, we're done. So off now with you, come on, quick quick, we have already lost too much time," he ushered Cedric into the coach, or at least tried to. The boy, however, remained hesitant, looking at his Godmo—well, -father warily.

"I am very grateful for what you have done and created here to allow me to go to that ball after all---"

"Yes, yes, no time for that now, you can thank me later—"

"I was not thanking you," Cedric interrupted Gabe, though his upbringing cringed at this kind of rude behavior.

"Oh?" the other man slash fairy commented with a raised eyebrow.

"I was just... well, I *am* thankful, of course, but I was nonetheless wondering if you intended to let me go to the ball like - this." To clarify, he pointed at himself.

Another "Oh." from Gabriel was the initial reply, followed by yet a third "Oh!", this one, however, of recognition. "Of course!" he exclaimed and without further ado began gesturing wildly once again. Magic soon made Cedric's skin tingle, surrounded him and embraced him, and while he was sure he smelled the distinct fragrance of freesias, he felt a slight pull at his remaining clothes. He couldn't, however, see anything until the magic dust settled.

And then he couldn't quite believe his own eyes. Looking down, he found himself dressed in a dark silver tuxedo with matching shoes; it was elegant, breathtaking, and so much more salient than he should have felt comfortable wearing. Yet for some reason, he felt just that - comfortable. Maybe because he was sure that absolutely no one would be able to recognize him like this.

"You just could not resist," a sudden and unexpected grumbling comment from Balt made Cedric face his former dog-friend in question.

"What do you mean?" the boy asked instead of letting Gabe answer.

"Do you have a mirror for him?" Balt again addressed Gabriel, who conjured the requested object up and gave it to Cedric, not without replying, though, "I think I have quite outdone myself there, don't you think?" Balthazar only snorted and rolled his eyes.

Though not entirely sure, Cedric assumed that his friend's comment referred to the cravat he was wearing - one in a blazing fountain blue - the exact same shade as his eyes. Even Cedric had to admit that while probably no one would recognize him, he would surely be noticed. It worried him a little.

Round two of ushering the boy into the carriage was eventually crowned by success and only shortly thereafter they were on their way, rushing through the night, waved after by Gabriel, who unconsciously brushed away a little tear from the corner of his eye.

Only then he realized that he hadn't warned Cedric that he would only have till the morning light before the magic dissolved.

## PART 2

The ride to the castle was as quiet as it was fast. Balthazar was, it seemed, a natural when it came to handling and reigning the horses. Even the narrowest and roughest of roads they passed without incident, even though Cedric once or twice felt his stomach drop; for more reasons than one he hoped they would soon arrive. As the carriage came to a stop in front of the palace, however, the young man realized that he was anything but ready, or prepared, to face the music. Literally and figuratively.

Next to him he heard Balthazar, who was holding the door open for him, say something he wasn't capable of hearing in these moments, overwhelmed by it all as he was.

Only when Balt quipped, "You know, we can always just go back, have that lunatic return everything to normal, and I can go back to li--" Cedric was pulled from his reverie and shot his friend a reprimanding look.

"Yes, all right, I am going," he almost shouted, and if only to mask what he knew his friend was about to say. Something that was very unbecoming of a man standing in front of the royal family's home. Or anywhere else, for that matter. With a sigh he finally left the carriage. Casting a sidelong glance at Balt, he asked quietly, "Wish me luck?"

And what he hadn't thought possible suddenly became true - Balthazar turned very serious when he replied:

"You do not need any luck. You have the kindest heart of them all in there, and those in their right mind will see and appreciate it. And trust me, there are those in there. If there is one thing I have learned in my long life, it is that kindness will always prevail. Even if it takes a little longer; even if this evil step-family of yours makes you think otherwise."

Unbidden tears pooled in Cedric's eyes and he threw his arms around his former-canine friend in a quick hug, before squaring his shoulders and starting up the steps towards the castle's entrance. Still - even just walking up the gigantic staircase, he felt somewhat displaced. He had been a servant for so long that being amongst the rich and beautiful and, moreover, royal, didn't seem right in his decent mind.

But he carried on, showing much more confidence than he actually had in him.

It was odd to have the guards bow to him. They looked at him like he belonged; and maybe he did also, after all, the invitation had asked for every eligible bachelor to attend, and wasn't he one? Lord Crowley and his daughters might have argued it, but the fact remained - he had every right to be at this ball, as much as everyone else.

His path through the castle was guided by closed doors and guard opening others, until there was a huge... one need to have called it portal, for door surely didn't properly describe what it in fact was, with its enormous size. The wings covering this portal swung aside with an ease that defied the impression they gave due to their dimensions, and Cedric almost forgot to walk through, so fascinated he was by what he saw.

A light cough from one of the guards - and indeed, the noise of voices and music from inside the ballroom - shook the boy from his contemplations and he stood a little straighter before he slowly entered the room.

He felt overwhelmed for the second time this evening when he took in the interior. Standing on top of another huge staircase, he was able to enjoy a perfect view of everything and everyone; of crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling and standing along the walls; of tapestry of the finest materials and held in royal colors; of a marble floor waiting to be danced on; of luxurious dresses and tuxedos, shining shoes and glittering jewelry. Of a dream world, a fairytale realm, heavenly and surreal.

He dared to be proud of himself that he didn't flee the scene right then and there.

It wouldn't have made the best impression either, seeing that all of a sudden a hush fell over the room and apparently every single attendee as well as the royal family stared up at him. What he had dreaded before now

became true - he was indeed a sight to behold, with his silver tuxedo shimmering in the soft lights, and it earned him undivided attention. Or at least that was what he hoped, for the alternative - dirt, creases, or anything else that could and sure would be laughed at - was something he rather not consider.

With a start he remembered that he couldn't remain standing up there at the top of the stairs for all eternity, and thus slowly began to descend the steps. The crowd that had gathered at the bottom parted when he reached them, as if he was the special guest everyone had been waiting for.

He reached the royal family, bowed to them and, straightening up again, came face to face with who he assumed was Prince Dean. And that was when he almost believed himself to be special as well. Because never before had anyone looked at him like this. Never before had someone given him this feeling that he was the only one in the whole wide world, even though there were hundreds of others around them. Staring at them. Waiting.

Another young man with unusually long hair eventually clapped his hands and the music that had died down started up again, as did the dancers in the room. Cedric was about to go and mingle with the crowd, in hopes he would not be seen by Crowley and the girls, but a deep, rough yet velvet voice stopped him.

"May I ask for this dance, Sir?" The young man's eyes widened when he realized that no other than the Prince himself had spoken this request. The royal bachelor in question - and he wanted to dance with him, Cedric, prince of the chimney dust?!

Scraping together every last ounce of courteous behavior, he bowed again as he replied, "I would be most honored, your Royal Highness." Even though he rather would have declined, and if only not to embarrass himself with his lack of dancing skills.

Prince Dean held up his hand in a silent offer, and Cedric laid his own in it, feeling the warmth, and a skin that matched the voice of its owner - rough yet also soft, calloused fingers of a man not above handiwork, but who still took care of himself.

He was being led into the middle of the dance floor and pulled close, and the servant boy let it happen, entranced by those beautiful orbs of rich forest green looking intensely at him, hypnotizing him as they began to sway to the music. Cedric couldn't have said if everyone else in the room had gone quiet, or if he simply didn't hear them anymore because he was so focused on his dance partner. One who held him so close that Cedric felt the firm and well-toned body even through layers of fabric; and who in turn the servant held onto for dear life so not to faint, step on the prince's feet, or simply gawk at him stupidly. Though the latter he probably did regardless.

"I have never before seen you around," Dean eventually began to speak, his face so close Cedric felt his eyes crossing in an attempt to focus on these beautiful features before him. "Have you moved here recently?"

"No, Sire, I grew up in this town."

"So where have you been all my life?" the royal continued with an indignant question, but his expression made it clear that he was just teasing. At least that was something those who weren't as oblivious to subtlety as Cedric would have noticed.

However, Cedric was Cedric, and his life experiences had taught him that people around him rarely ever joked and teased - unless it was with a malicious intent to mislead and discredit him.

"I apologize, Sire, I have never had the opportunity to visit the palace, so there neither has ever been the chance to--"

"Oh, angel, don't even think about apologizing, I was merely joking!" Dean interrupted him, surprised and a little shocked. Cedric, on his part, stopped listening after the endearment the other man addressed him with, the word repeating in his head over and over as they continued to sway to the music.

Angel. He had called him, Cedric, the servant, the boy no one cared or had any regard for, who the prince had met mere minutes ago for the first time, *angel*. If only Dean knew.

"Now, tell me," the prince regained his dance partner's attention, "what is your name?"

"I... my name is..." At first, Cedric wasn't sure if he should really give his name away. What if by his name, he was able to find out where he came from and what he was? What if he continued to ask questions once he knew his name? This was the prince, the heir to the throne, Cedric couldn't just tell him he rather not reveal his name.

While he was still considering his options - not that there actually were any except honestly answering the question - a familiar face came into Cedric's view. One he had hoped so much he wouldn't need to see this evening. Alas, luck had, as long as he could remember, never been a huge part of his life, so why should it be on this day?

He couldn't be sure if Lord Crowley had already recognized him, as intently as he stared at the dancing couple, but his stomach dropped in any case. Unconsciously his grip on Dean tightened, and he did his best to turn his head so his face would be obscured from the lord's piercing eyes.

"Are you all right?" the prince asked, and worry was evident in his voice.

"Yes, it is just... I do not feel quite so comfortable, being watched by this many people. They all seem to stare at us. Why is no one else dancing?"

"I suppose it is because many of them, following the invitation, came here to dance with *me*. And probably hope to gain my attention for more than just a dance. I tell you a secret - I hate festivities like this one. I know my uncle and aunt's intentions are only the best ones; I know it is expected by my people that I find a spouse before I rise to the throne. But in my opinion it is a preposterous notion. My ability to rule will not improve just because I choose a king or queen consort. And especially will it not be of any use if the chosen at my side only hungers for the title, power and wealth that come with the position, but not me and my wellbeing. If you ask me, I highly doubt that most of those in this room truly and honestly care about me as a person."

Dean's honest and open words shocked, but also touched Cedric. The prince told him something that he should only talk about with his closest confidants. Yet here they were, the man this ball was all about, and a lowly servant, twirling to the tune coming from the orchestra, while the former revealed to the latter a part of his soul.

And all he was able to come up with as an answer was a lame "I am sorry," which he chided himself for. He felt unworthy. Once more, and as it had been the case so often in his life, he had to conclude that even if your mother taught and told you of your worth, in the end it wasn't for you to decide. Life decided about it. And any moment now, so would Prince Dean.

Cedric felt regret, but also strangely calm and content when indeed seconds later their dance stopped. He felt more than saw the prince readying himself to say something.

"Let us go somewhere more private."

And there it was. This was his cue. All he could do now was try to leave with as much dignity as he---

*Hold on. What?*

There was no proper word in his vocabulary to describe his condition in these very seconds. Confused certainly was too mild. As he was gently pulled from the dance floor by Dean, and led through yet unknown hallways and rooms into a garden, his mind was a pandemonium of thoughts and fears and hopes.

He was still in that curious condition of contemplation when Dean sat him down on a bench stuffed with heavenly fluffy pillows. Cedric sunk into the lush upholstery so much he forgot his thoughts and worries for a moment and instead wondered if he was still visible. Judging by Prince Dean's amused chuckle and the twinkle in those beautiful eyes, he supposed that he wasn't much more than a silver lining among the cushions... so to speak.

"You know, I have told my parents countless times that it makes no sense have such... fluffy," and he spoke the word with such drama in his voice that Cedric had to suppress a giggle, "cushions, especially outside in the gardens. But do they ever listen to me?" Dean let out an exasperated sigh, quite theatrically, though it became clear he wasn't really serious.

"They probably just want everyone to be comfortable. They care about their family," Cedric felt himself reply thoughtfully, and immediately wanted to clasp his hands over his mouth at what he believed were much too scolding words to say to a man he had only just met *and* was a member of the royal family. He should have known by now that Dean wouldn't mind; quite the contrary.

"They really do. I'm very lucky," he agreed quietly, and a sad smile grazed his featured for a fraction of a second. The story behind that expression wasn't all that hard to guess. Everyone in the kingdom knew that the recent king and queen weren't the princes' real parents, and what tragedy had befallen them all those years back.

"Having a home and a family is the greatest fortune life can grant us with," Cedric uttered thoughtfully, and felt the royal heir's eyes rest on him after he had spoken this thought. He wasn't sure who he was referring to; or which family. Because what good was a family that despised you? That you didn't receive any love from, but only resentment and animosity?

"Indeed it is." There was something inquiring in the prince's voice, as if he felt and saw that there was more to the other man's words than a heartfelt statement about life, but when no further explanation came, he also didn't insist. Instead, he exclaimed, "Come, I want to introduce you to someone," and held out his hand, pulling Cedric up and quickly led him deeper into the gardens.

Amidst a circle of high hedges a horse eventually came into view, standing tall and proud and looking right at them when they arrived, as if waiting for its master. Its pitch black coat shone like liquid in the light of the full moon above them, and its equally dark eyes spoke of kindness and intelligence.

"Hey there, old girl," Dean greeted the steed, which in turn nudged the princes' shoulder, snorting a little. In a demonstration of understanding its human owner corrected himself immediately: "Yes, all right, young girl of course."

Cedric had to smile at their interaction. He had heard of such close connections between horse and rider, but never witnessed it himself. Even though he was on what could call friendly terms with their last remaining two horses of his household, he was far from having such friendship with them.

"Angel, meet Impala, my faithful mare, the fastest and cleverest horse in the whole kingdom," Cedric was introduced to the animal, and carefully lifted his hand to pet its neck. In turn he earned himself a gentle nudge. "I think she likes you."

"She is very beautiful. And... Impala is a curious name. What does it mean?"

"To be honest, I have no idea. She was my father's before; he named her. She has always been there, for as long as I can remember. In a way she is my rock, my pillar of strength. I bring her here when she needs a break, and I come here when I do the same. It is our secret hiding place; not many know it and those who do will not dare to disturb." Pointing to a small fountain, Dean started walking towards the same. Impala trotted behind him and when the prince sat down on the stone ledge, the horse next to him bowed down to drink from the clear water.

Cedric had followed Dean and took a seat on the stone as well. Only when he looked up, however, he realized that there was obviously another reason for this being the royal heir's favorite spot - apart from being a hideaway. Because in his line of sight now came the view the green portal through which they had entered offered: That of the faraway horizon that was already dressing itself in the colors of the soon-to-begin dawn.

"So, angel... you still haven't told me your name," Dean began after another few minutes of silence, and Impala neighed lightly following her master's words, as if to support his statement.

"I'm not sure I should," Cedric replied before he was able to stop himself, but decided that it was the most honest answer he was able to give, and the other man deserved no less.

"And whyever not?"

"I fear that revealing my name and identity will remind me of the real world out there and set an end to this wonderful dream I am in right now."

"What makes you believe this dream has to end?"

"Don't all dreams? At least in my experience, they do." Quieter, he added, "They are being smashed to the ground by those who will not allow you to have them."

Dean only looked at Cedric, his expression thoughtful - and his eyes full of affection. It took the servant boy's breath away. How could someone he had only just met, and knew nothing about, look at him as if he was his whole world?

"Some dreams don't have to end, angel. It is up to us if they do. Even if sometimes we are led to believe that we have no control over them; even if sometimes hurt and tragedy seem to rule unbidden and against all our efforts."

"It sounds so simple when you say it. Even though I know there is nothing simple about your life and past." The Prince smiled at that, and Cedric felt himself returning it. Suddenly he was faced with such beauty as the features of that wonderfully perfect creature next to him lit up that for a moment, he was almost able to forget his every sorrow.

"No, there is not. But neither there is about dreams; and yet they are with us, always." With a sidelong glance and in a dizziness-inducing change of subject, Dean asked, "You want to ride her?"

"What?"

"Impala. I let you ride her. Believe me, not many are allowed to."

"But... I..."

"Do not be scared, there is no reason. Trust me?" Curiously enough, Cedric didn't have to think long to answer that question.

"Yes."

With a winning smile at his companion, Dean guided his horse so it came to stand next to the fountain's ledge, which he used as a step to mount the steed. He gestured for Cedric to do the same, and pulled him up so he came to sit in front of him. Then he led Impala on to walk a few rounds in this small, circular area, and the animal contently complied.

To the servant boy, it felt so different from his usual riding experience. For one, he had never sat on a horse without a saddle; it was strange to feel the movements of muscles and bones so prominently against his legs. Instead of reigns his hands were holding onto the mane; soft, silky strands tickled and caressed his fingers. And

of course there was the man behind him, holding onto him, one arm around his middle, the other on his upper arm, as he gently spoke to the mare carrying them. Dean's head was next to Cedric's, his chin almost resting on his shoulder, and his voice, this incredible tune of his vocal cords, vibrated in his ear.

If there ever was a reason to say that the luck of this world is sitting in the saddle of a horse - or, in that case, on a horse's back, it certainly was now.

"It's your turn now," Dean all of a sudden murmured, and the hand that had just been resting on his arm also wound around him. Worried to do anything wrong, to alienate or hurt the steed, Cedric only very carefully and gently spurred it on, to which Impala of course didn't react. Next to his ear, a deep rumble of laughter sounded. "She isn't made of glass, you know. You have to guide her. Don't be afraid."

And he wasn't anymore. Bravely he encouraged the horse to move faster, trot around the arena-like place, and back and forth a few times between the hedges. It felt good. It felt good to have the animal listen to him, even though he gathered it was a proud one who rarely ever followed anyone's orders except Prince Dean's. And it felt good to have Dean trust him to lead his mare on.

Much too soon their little riding session was over, and as Dean detached himself from Cedric to climb down, the young man felt colder than this warm summer night should have allowed for. Alas, he had no reason to mourn, as the prince put much more effort in helping his guest to get off the horse than needed. And thus he found himself once more in the arms of the royal heir, both of them standing on the stony rim of the artificial well.

All Cedric was able to do when the prince didn't let go of him was focus on his face, his eyes, much like he had done earlier during their dance. The effect was similar - he felt himself getting lost in this rich green that seemed to reflect the nature surrounding them, and was yet so uniquely Dean. The look that was being aimed at him bore an intensity that it took the young man's breath away, and he felt unable to move as the other man was leaning in, coming closer, closer---

And his world was turning upside down.

It took him a couple of moments to realize that this wasn't a good thing.

Pulling himself from his trance, he noticed that they were not standing upright anymore, but in the progress of-- falling??? What in the name of...??? They both gasped as they struggled to keep from stumbling into the water. It seemed like a choreography practiced a hundred times that had them coordinate their limbs and manage to find their footing again; it was as if they had never done anything else. When they both finally sat on the stone again, Dean shot Impala a dirty look.

"That was not nice, old girl," he growled, purposely using the moniker the horse had protested about earlier. This time, she only neighed - and Cedric was sure it sounded like laughter. He understood then that apparently the horse had, with a well-placed shove, caused their *moment* to end and them to almost involuntarily share a bath. Impala wasn't too keen to share Dean just yet, he surmised, and couldn't help but chuckle at the thought. After a few seconds, the prince joined in, and they both shared a good laugh while the royal petted his mare.

"She is very strong-willed."

"I think the word you are looking for is thick-headed," Dean grumped good-naturedly, and Cedric laughed even harder. It felt relieving; it had been a long time since he had any reason to laugh like that. They remained quiet for a while after they had calmed down again, lost in their own thoughts. Only after several minutes Dean once more spoke up.

"You know... it may sound silly and pretentious, with all the riches I am surrounded by, but this - sitting here, laughing together, watching a sunrise with someone I... with someone like you..." Dean trailed off and instead gently took the other man's hand lying between them, cocking his head in the direction of the portal. "Is the most precious moment in my life I have yet had the honor of being gifted with."

The sunrise, yes... only now did he notice that it had started, painting the horizon in pastel purples, pinks, oranges and yellows. A breathtaking spectacle all in itself Cedric had always liked watching, something that had been special to him already when he was enjoying it alone, but now, beside this man who was about to claim his heart unbidden, who once more was leaning in, closer, willing to finish what had been interrupted only moments earlier, and whose green orbs turned into rainbow colored ones where they reflected the hues of dawn...

"The sunrise!" he exclaimed when it hit him how late it was already. Or early, depending on one's point of view. He needed to leave, to get home, and he needed to be there before his step-family arrived, or else...

Oblivious to his worries, Prince Dean was only confused by his company's sudden erratic behavior when the boy jumped up and gestured wildly. Impala also took a few steps back, neighing irritably.

"Yes, morning will arrive soon, my dearest. Why is this so--"

"I need to head home, I... I will be awaited. It will not be taken kindly if I arrive this late... or early... or..." Cedric shook his head and looked at Dean one last time, taking in and memorizing the sight of this man who was so beautiful, inside and out. When he was content - as much as he would ever be - that there was nothing more to etch into his mind, he bowed. "Thank you for everything, your Highness."

And then he ran.

Cedric ran as if his life depended on it, and maybe it did. Even though he reminded himself constantly that he was allowed to be here, that the invitation had been for him as well, he nonetheless feared repercussions. After all had Crowley and his daughters made it quite clear that they didn't want him to come here. If they now learned that he was the one who had held the prince's attention the whole night they would torture him for months and years to come, and that in every thinkable way.

No, he had to leave, get away, get back before his absence was noticed.

In that labyrinth of doors and hallways Cedric knew nothing about he relied only on instinct to find a way out. He believed that as long as he was moving, he had a chance to find the right exit and thus also his carriage and Balthazar waiting for him. Dodging guards and trinkets alike, he slowly began to recognize his surroundings, and was certain that he had reached the hallways he had entered the castle through.

Behind him, he heard Dean call out to him. Apparently the prince was following him, the sound of feet meeting the ground in a fast rhythm never ceasing as he pushed forward. He was finally rewarded for his efforts when the entrance doors came into his view, already swinging open.

But they also closed again already while he was still heading for them, because Prince Dean behind him yelled for the portal to be shut. Life, however, had taught Cedric many things, and one of them was to be quick and nimble, because it could get you out of all kinds of situations. Therefore doors in the progress of closing, with only a small opening between them still left, were no obstacle for the servant boy, and he slipped through the ever narrowing gap with an unparalleled grace.

His breath came in heavy gasps, his lungs at the end of their capacity. The cravat he was wearing seemed to get tighter with every meter he ran, so he loosened it with hands that were shaking due to exhaustion, clumsy fingers not managing to keep grip on the piece of cloth. It was ripped from his fingers and neck by the draft of his running, and sailed to the stairs somewhere behind him.

There was no time to stop and breathe though; no time to go back for it. His carriage was now visible from where he was at the top of the stairs, and as fast as his feet would carry him without risking a fatal fall down same staircase Cedric rushed on.

Almost. Almost there.



### Part 3

"My my, was that a long night," Balthazar commented with a crooked grin when he watched his master and friend hurry into the carriage. The cravat, Balt noticed, was gone, and he honestly wondered how and when Cedric had lost it; hoping that there was a delightfully naughty reason for it. On the other hand, knowing his friend as well as he did...

"We need to leave, come on, Balt," came Cedric's strangled yell, an attempt to not be too loud while trying to express the urgency. An urgency the former canine couldn't quite understand, but after all, he was just a servant, there to follow orders.

Taking his seat up front, he grabbed the reins and spurred on the horses. At the same moment he heard someone shout and quick steps of a person running.

"Wait!" the voice called after them, "don't leave yet! At least tell me your name!" Only when they took a turn to head for the road Balthazar was able to catch a glimpse of this voice's owner, and a funny expression befell his face when he realized who had just been calling out to them. And who Cedric had been fleeing from.

"Why is the prince shouting for us to wait?" he asked slowly, head half turned toward the small opening behind him while he tried to keep his eyes on the road.

"It is a...um... longer story."

"You did not do anything inexcusable, did you?" Cedric sighed heavily.

"I danced with him. We left for a beautiful garden that is only to be used by the royal family, he took me to his secret hideaway, introduced me to his horse, and we watched the sunrise. And then I realized how late it already was and... ran away."

"I hope you know how utterly ridiculous this sounds," Balt deadpanned and rolled his eyes. All of it did. Introduction to a horse included, but that was besides the point.

"I had no choice, Balthazar! We need to get home before Lord Crowley and his daughters are back. Do you have any inkling of what they will do to me if they learn I have been at the ball after all *and* occupied the prince they were there to meet the whole evening?!"

"They will hopefully all have a heart attack and your problems will be solved?"

"We are not supposed to think like this, Balthazar. We ought not to be like them." Now it was the former dog's turn to sigh.

"No, you are right, we are not. But Cedric - they treat you like a nasty rash on their skin. If you laid down at their front door and let them use you as their doormat, do you think they would even notice? They are already trampling over you as it is."

"They would notice when there was no one around anymore to clean up after them..." The boy grouched and leaned back. It was then that he noticed something. Something strange. Something... changing.

His tuxedo was dissolving, thread by thread. It only took him a few moments to understand what was happening.

"Balt... I think we need to hurry... the magic seems to---"

"Yes, I have noticed," came the instant reply, followed by a dog's paw coming into his view. "So how about I see to it that we get home as fast as possible, and you entertain me with that little story of your heroic escape from the clutches of an obviously besmitten prince?"

"Balthazar!"

"No, you do not Balthazar me! I put up with that lunatic turning me into a human, and I waited hours in front of the castle, which I spent using up all of my self-control - and trust me, there is not a lot of that we dogs have - not to raise my leg on the next tree, or carriage for that matter, so I believe I deserve that tale as long as my brain is still able to process it properly."

At that point, ashamed as he was of his own behavior, whether towards Dean or Balt, Cedric gave in. His eyes still fixed on the fabric covering his body turning into single fine lines and then thin air, he began to speak.

"Prince Dean is very... very... nice."

"How romantic," Balt snorted, and it sounded strange, for his nose and mouth had already begun to resemble a canine's snout again. Cedric pretended to be unfazed by it.

"He is incredibly kind and funny and so... un-royal. He not once during the evening made me feel like I was inferior to him, someone of a lesser status. We talked about family, and dreams, and it was like we have never done anything else. He even told me things that... well... he spoke to me openly about how much he oftentimes loathes this life as a prince, and heir to the throne. I think he is unhappy, Balthazar. He has so much, and it must feel like it is caging him in. He would rather roam the world than sit on a throne and reign over these lands. In a way, I suppose we are not that different. He wants to be free, just like I do, even if it is for different reasons."

This time, there was no reply, and Cedric soon discovered why. While the general form of a human was still there, Balthazar was already more dog again than man. Diligently he was clutching the reigns with his paws as much as this was possible, doing his best to bring them home safe, even though it was obvious what strain it put on the poor creature. Cedric felt regret over having lost a friend he could talk to; but he was also glad to see that same friend would return to be what he believed preferred to be. He just hoped that the magic left them enough time to arrive home before the rest of the household did.

He was hoping in vain.

Shortly after the thought had crossed his mind, magic exploded all around them, just like it had the evening before - but this time it was to dissolve rather than to create.

What remained were shreds of an old ball, several mice, a heap of yarn, and his faithful hound, who shook himself more thoroughly than Cedric assumed was strictly necessary. In his own hand he found the sapphire pin that had held his cravat in place; he was sure that had been lost, too, when the fabric had flown away. Maybe it was a last bit of magic that granted him this keepsake.

Raising to his feet, he crawled Balthazar behind his ears for a moment before he, with a sigh, began to head for his home at a fast pace. He knew it wasn't that far away anymore, but by foot he'd be considerably slower than any carriage, even if it left from the castle only now, and his step-family simply mustn't find the house deserted when they arrived.

Cedric couldn't bring himself to have one last look at the sunrise happening behind him; dipped in orange, the world around him reminded him already enough of what he had left behind. All that was of importance now was to get home and not find himself being punished yet another time.

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"He can't be gone. How can he be gone? It's not as if he can vanish into thin air, is it?!" Dean ranted, angry and confused and sad about the sudden departure of his nightly companion. His hand clasped the cravat he had found on the stairs so tight it would have crumbled to dust, had it been made of something breakable.

"No, Sire," the castle guard's captain, a man called Benjamin, answered. He and his men had taken up following the carriage of the nameless visitor after the king and queen as well as Dean's own brother had stopped the royal heir from leaving the castle grounds. After all, no one knew if it wasn't some kind of trap, they had argued, and even though the older prince had called them stupid and paranoid and some other things he was certainly going to regret later, he had ultimately surrendered and stayed back. "All I can tell you is that we had sight of the carriage the one second, but the next it wasn't visible anymore. It was, safe for one turn, a straight road through the woods, the view was only for short moments obstructed by trees. Yet somehow they managed to be gone within these moments. I have no explanation. Please forgive me."

Dean shook his head and exhaled audibly through his nose. His grip around the cravat loosened a little.

"No, captain, it is I who must apologize. I know it is not your fault. Something strange is going on, something... something supernatural. But whatever it is, I will not give up. I will find him." The declaration had everyone else in the room look at each other, with matching expressions.

Prince Samuel stood to the side, watching what was unfolding with equal parts of curiosity and worry. He didn't understand why his brother was so determined to chase a dream. Because as of yet Sam had seen no proof that this seemingly perfect individual did exist. Of course had the younger prince seen Dean dance with another man, handsome for sure, and maybe also decent enough, but his brother had spent not more than a few hours with him, and after everything Sam had learnt and seen himself, he didn't believe that it was enough to choose someone as their partner.

After guards and advisors had left and Sam stayed back alone with his brother, he decided to voice his thoughts.

"So... who is he?"

"I don't know." It was a simple enough answer. One that astonished the younger prince to speechlessness. As he looked at his brother with huge eyes and in disbelief, Dean groaned. "I do *not* know," he repeated, exasperated. "He would not, or could not, tell me his name. I called him angel and... it fit. He is so different, Sammy. He seemed to understand so well. With him I did not feel like a price someone wanted to win, or means to an end called wealth, lands and title. With him, I was able to just be... me. It was so perfect." Once more, Dean growled. "Maybe too perfect. He ran away, Sam, just like this, in the middle of a flawless moment, and I still don't know why."

"Whatever the reason was, perhaps you should--"

"He rode Impala," Dean interrupted his brother. "She likes him. And you know she usually likes no one. That has to mean something." Sam rose an eyebrow at that.

"You never let *anyone* ride your horse. It took me *years* to get you to allow *me* that." There was no question in there, no accusation either. It was just a statement of a fact. When it came to Impala, Dean barely let anyone touch her, not even the stable boys. And riding her? Everyone knew that they likely wouldn't live to tell the tale if they ever tried. Sam was the only one who had ever been allowed to once or twice take her out for a short trip.

That he had allowed a complete stranger to mount her either meant that his brother was under the influence of some dangerous magic - and given that Sam didn't believe in such things, it was a thought that put fear in him for a multitude of reasons - or with this nameless man someone unexpectedly special had graced their ball with his presence. Both seemed implausible, in one way or the other; the third possibility, that his brother had simply lost his mind, however, he rather avoided even considering.

"So what are you going to do now?" Sam inquired when Dean didn't reply to his earlier words concerning Impala - and really, what more was there to say about that. His brother only shrugged, looking almost helpless for fractions of a second, like a lost little boy.

"If only I knew that. Continue the search. Find my angel."

"And if you do not? Find him, I mean?" The younger prince saw and heard his brother take a deep breath. The cravat still in the older ones hand was brought up and pressed to Dean's chest, right over his heart.

"I will, Sammy. I will find him. I must not doubt that."

And Prince Sam really wished his brother would remain right; for his sake and anyone else's in their family, castle and maybe even lands.

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Despite the dire memories and experiences it housed, the walls of the home he had grown up in coming in sight still warmed Cedric's heart every time. So much cold and bitterness lived there now, so much cruelty and pain - and yet all those terrible things had never been able to erase the good it had held in its past.

As he walked up to the back entrance, through the garden, and looked at the reddish-brown bricks the walls were made of and that the early morning sunlight now dipped in its glow, Cedric couldn't help but smile. The peace and quiet lying over the estate was rare these days, and only present during these hours when the rest of the household - namely the Lord Crowley and his daughters - hadn't risen from their sleep. Or were, as it was the case now, not at home. Cedric loved these moments, these few precious hours when he could pretend that everything was alright, that life was good and happy, like it used to be all those years ago.

Sighing, he walked up the steps to the back porch, and let himself into the house through the door that led directly into the kitchen. He was quick to light a fire in the hearth, hanging over it a kettle with water to boil for tea. Gabriel had made good in his promise and cleaned and tidied everything up; he even had prepared some food Cedric would only have to put some finishing touches to and serve later.

Confident that everything looked as it should and nothing would raise any suspicions, he hastened up the stairs to the attic. He had to change into other clothes; walking around still in the remnants of the suit the sisters had torn apart surely would be cause for questions he'd rather not have to answer.

It was only when he had just reached his room that he heard the front door being thrown shut loudly and the shrill voices of his step-sisters ringing through the hall. Even though he wasn't able to make out the words that were spoken, it was obvious they were anything but happy, and he assumed he didn't have to speculate the reason.

Quick and efficient he dressed himself new, and was just on his way down when he heard Lord Crowley and his daughters shout for him in perfect unison. At least some perfection they managed in their lives.

"Cinderic, tea and a plate of biscuits!" Rubina demanded, as she and her sister swaggered into the dining room.

Cedric hurried into the kitchen and checked on the water which was not yet but close to boiling, then busied himself with the biscuits. But despite his step family being back and commanding him again, and the evening being over, the young man couldn't stop smiling. Meeting Dean... dancing with him, talking to him... it still felt like a dream, and he couldn't even be sure that it hadn't been one. Even though he knew it had been real. He had been there! If only there was a way to turn back time.

If only there was a way to see Dean again.

The kettle whistled and steamed, but in Cedric's little dream world of memory there was no kettle, no stove, no kitchen, and certainly no step family. Just he and Dean.

He vividly remembered these beautiful eyes, looking deep into his while they danced; the velvety voice caressing his ears and making it hard for him to concentrate on what was being said; the strong embrace that held him, inside the ballroom and in their short hours of retreat in the garden.

While his hands did their work automatically, his mind was occupied with remembrance. It also helped him to tune out the step-family blathering away about things they had seen... and not seen. Cedric was happy - as always - to ignore them as much as possible; and this time there was something really amazing to have his thoughts busied with. *Someone* amazing.

But the moment the tea was ready, brewed and on the table came all too soon, and with it that very rare and, from his experience, always suspicious invitation from Lord Crowley to sit with them. Hesitantly Cedric sat down, wiping his hands on the apron he was wearing, and then tried and failed to straighten his posture to show confidence. Because if there was something he didn't have it was self-assuredness, especially not when the lord was looking at him with that kind of smile that seemed to tell him that he'd be eaten alive soon.

"So tell me, *Cinderic*," Crowley began and the servant did his best not to flinch or make a face at the mention of that moniker, "is there any particular reason why you would be outside so early?" Both girls as well as the servant boy looked at the lord with confusion; however, in Cedric's face a little bit of fear was already to be found.

"I... I'm not sure I understand, my lord."

"Oh, I believe you understand quite well."

"No, I---"

"You really want to have the audacity to lie to me? To insult my intelligence?"

"No, of course not, I just don't..." Cedric trailed off when Crowley inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly and audibly.

"You were out on the road, earlier, before we returned. I saw you from our carriage," Lord Crowley elaborated, his demeanor showing that he saw his answer as generosity on his part.

"I... I was taking a walk. It was a beautiful morning and--"

"And you were doing this walk in the ripped clothes from yesterday evening, because...?" A lump formed in Cedric's throat; he hadn't thought about his appearance, or that Crowley could have been able to see what he was wearing. He knew that he wouldn't find a good enough explanation now; if the lord was exemplary at anything, then certainly at spotting any kind of lie or unfaithfulness on his servant's part. Even those that weren't actual lies.

"What were you doing?!" Megan hissed at her step-brother while her sister narrowed her eyes, hands on her hips. Something that looked very strange due to her still sitting in her dining table chair with its armrests, but while at any other time Cedric would silently have been amused about such a picture, he now was too worried, if not scared, to care.

He needed to think quickly, to find any kind of explanation that would be plausible enough to at least shake whatever suspicion Crowley had. But his heart was thumping, blood rushing in his ears, and his throat felt constricted. He was panicking and he knew there was no way he could rely on his rationality now.

Lord Crowley's gravel "We are waiting." didn't help either.

But then something strange happened; something he couldn't make any sense of at first, but would later, much later, believe to have been a helpful and magical nudge from Gabriel: An image flashed through his mind, him, half sitting and half lying at the rim of the fountain, fast asleep. He knew it wasn't what had happened, but the image gave him an idea how to answer his step-father's question.

"I fell asleep. I was exhausted and... and... sad" he offered, knowing he would make himself vulnerable, but it was a small price to pay if he could dispel the others' doubts. "So I went to the backyard and sat at the rim of the fountain, where I fell asleep. With the sun rising and the animals waking, I did, too. I went for a short walk, then returned and changed my clothes, just as you were coming back." Slowly Cedric felt a little bit of confidence returning, because while the sisters pulled faces, they nevertheless seemed to believe him.

Lord Crowley, unfortunately, was a whole different issue.

"And how, my dearest Cinderic, do you explain," he began and reached into his suit jacket's right pocket, "this?" With that he pulled out the sapphire cravat pin, the only piece that had remained after the magic had dissolved. Cedric almost physically felt that punch of misfortune. Tears pooled in his eyes, because he knew there was only one reason why Crowley would share that he had found this pin - he knew *someone* had been wearing it at the ball. And since the lord was many things, but certainly not stupid, it probably wasn't hard to guess for him how that pin had found its way into the house. Cedric concluded he must have lost it when he was rushing to prepare the kitchen and himself for his step-family's return, and he cursed himself for his own stupidity. Alas, beating himself up didn't change anything; that he knew, too.

He took a deep breath. "I am not--"

"Oh don't bother. It was more of a rhetorical question. I mean, why waste precious time with you gabbling away about what we know already, when instead you could use that time to work? There is, after all, enough to do." Crowley didn't grace Cedric with another look or word; instead he simply made a dismissive gesture, got up and left the room, followed by two daughters hectically shuffling after their father. The time to throw their despised step-brother a nasty look Megan and Rubina nonetheless found.

When they were gone, Cedric crumbled to the ground like a puppet cut from its strings.

Yes. That evening had been a dream. Nothing but a dream. And he was going to pay for it.

A mere five minutes later, he heard Crowley call for him. Yell, really. With a terrible feeling in his stomach he picked himself up from the ground he was still sitting on. Slowly he approached the sitting room in which he found the lord standing at the window, and the sisters by the couch, all of them receiving him with dark expressions on their faces. Half of the room being dipped in shadows, as it was facing west, only added to the dreary impression the scenery gave.

Facing the gallows couldn't have been worse. Cedric wasn't even too sure if he hadn't preferred it right now over *this*.

"Cedric," Lord Crowley began and the fact that he once again used the young man's real name scared the same even more, "this whole... affair shows me that we have allowed you to become bored. And as boredom oftentimes goes hand in hand with ungratefulness, I suppose we have to blame ourselves for your behavior. Therefore something obviously has to change." While Megan and Rubina didn't move, except to let nasty sneers appear on their faces, their father walked towards Cedric, making the servant take the tiniest steps backwards, even though he tried his best not to show any fear. However, the lord didn't stop when he reached his step-son; instead he walked past him with the words, "I have a new task for you, something that is long overdue. Follow me."

Confused Cedric did as he was told, and soon realized that he was being led into the cellar. At the foot of the staircase leading down was a small hallway with a door on each side. One door opened into an equally small wine cellar; long since emptied and forgotten. The other covered a large, cluttered room, full of old, broken furniture, dismissed household items, dust and dirt and even waste.

The latter was also the room Crowley entered.

"This room need to be cleaned out. You will find it a satisfying task; no more boredom, no more reason or opportunity to be disobedient." Turning around to Cedric standing behind him, rooted to the spot in shock, the

older man added, "Also, henceforth I will oversee your daily chores and schedule." A devilish twinkle appeared in the beady eyes. "I am sure you will find this to be as much a fitting home for you as the attic was."

In the seconds it took Cedric to grab the meaning of the lord's words, the man himself had already soundly shut the heavy door and a clicking and jingling told of a lock coming into place.

"No, wait! I... wait!!!" Cedric woke from his shock and rushed to the door, but it was already too late. Hammering against it was in vain, as the lord was already ascending the stairs with loud steps, as if to demonstrate that all attempts to plead for freedom were useless.

The servant felt sick when he fell against the door with his back, sinking down to the ground. As he looked around the barely lit room, it was as if an ice-cold hand gripped his heart.

Everything down here once used to be part of his and his parents' home: a beautiful wardrobe, made of fine oak wood, lay half broken in one corner; a couple of soft armchairs looked torn apart and were overturned and forgotten in another. There were keepsakes and souvenirs from his parents' journeys everywhere, some destroyed, others covered in dust and dirt. Even a crystal chandelier, a rather valuable piece, he spotted, and wondered why it would have been banned down here, seeing that Lord Crowley and his daughters took possession of everything that held any monetary value.

Maybe it had been one of those that had gotten away - from the grabby hands, their greed, and their complete lack of respect and appreciation for what they had. From what Cedric knew, what he had overheard Lord Crowley telling about throughout the years, the man came from money, and had furthermore build up a flourishing yet questionable business. At least it used to be - or maybe it still was - but certainly didn't do it him any good, as he had been thrown out of it. Some distant relative had seen to it that Crowley was not interfering in or profiting from the business anymore; apparently that relative had even told the lord that he was dead to him.

All that had been left for Crowley and his daughters was what they were able to take with them, including their memories - and obviously they loved living in the past. Because, as it seemed, to Cedric's step-family their wealth had never been lost; the flow of riches never stopped. And so they continued living like nothing had changed, all at the expense of the home they didn't belong in, and the happiness of a boy who had only sought the warmth and safety of a family after his own had been taken from this world and life too soon.

With a helpless groan Cedric fell into one of the armchairs he had picked up and turned back around, then thrown a blanket he had found in one of the boxes standing around over it.

Every passing day made it harder to... well... accept his step-father and step-sisters. If he was completely honest, he had never loved them; no, he really wouldn't go that far as to claim that he had had feelings of affection for them at any time in the past. He may have liked them in the beginning, as strangers who seemed nice enough when they moved into the house, and when they stayed back with him after his mother had left the worldly plane; but too soon after his mother's passing they had shown their true faces.

Sometimes Cedric truly wondered why he bore their behavior. No reason and rule in the world should have kept him there; a life on the streets, or in the woods, could not have been worse. But then he looked around, at all these things that once made his family's house a home, and he knew the answer was neither devotion, nor fear; not diligence or decency.

It was hope.

Hope that one day, fate would make everything right.

And that he had to hold on to; had to have faith in. Cedric strongly believed that every twist and turn one's life took was there for a reason. The path he had taken, as stony it may ever have been, had eventually granted him the most special and magical night of his life. What he and Prince Dean had shared the young man would hold forever dear in his heart. Nothing would ever be able to take that from him. Even if the prince probably

had already forgotten about the encounter, had moved on and was to possibly soon marry another - his memory as eternal. He had been treated by the royal heir like an equal, with graciousness becoming of a just future king. Secretly Cedric knew he would give a lot to feel like this again; to be with Dean again.

As it were, however, he would continue to draw his strength from these precious moments he had been allowed.

And so he continued his work, sorting and cleaning, fixing where he could, and dreaming. Dreaming of leaving all this behind, and finding the love and appreciation his mother had once taught him everyone deserved.

#### Part 4

"Were you successful?"

"Does it look to you like I was, Sammy?" Dean huffed and stormed past his brother. Sam, however, stayed on his heels. Dean had been out, with short intermissions, for four days, had left no stone unturned. The younger brother had even went out and participated in the search himself, before Dean had told him that Sam was a greater help staying back, coordinating everything. And so he had, planning and structuring, two of the things he had always done best. Admittedly, it wasn't with much conviction that he was doing the right thing. Not because he didn't want to help his brother; but because he was worried he was fueling a pointless hope.

"I understand your desire to find who seems to have conquered your heart in such short time, brother, but do you not think there comes a time when one has to accept one's defeat? You have already been searching far and wide for him. Maybe he wishes to remain a stranger."

"Dearest brother, this is not acceptable. I have never met someone like him, nor will I ever again, I am sure of that. And I know I can find him. If I do so and he tells me that he does not wish any further acquaintance with me, I will accept it. But not like this. Not without doing everything in my powers to find him again and talk to him, at least one last time."

Samuel sighed and smiled sadly.

His brother had always been the hotheaded one; the one to follow his heart and his instincts and never listen to reason, or think things through. So he had set his mind to finding this stranger. Then maybe he should. Ultimately, the only question one had to ask was: what did he have to lose?

His heart? Maybe. If he hadn't already.

His dignity, as he was frantically searching for a mysterious stranger, someone he didn't even know the name of, but only called 'angel'? Perhaps.

His sanity, with his ability to become obsessed with something, like he had many years back together with their father when it was about the cause of the fire that had killed their mother? Very likely.

In a way, it scared Sam.

The brothers had once sworn to protect each other, be there for the other. Of course they were not alone, thankfully not; they had their aunt and uncle, the castle guards and personnel, and all of them took good care of them. They were a family by choice where they weren't by blood. But nothing was stronger and more important than the bond between Dean and Samuel. And nothing Sam feared more than losing his brother, in whatever way, be it to death or insanity.

If it had been in his powers, he would have gone and found this stranger. Not searched - no, found. He would have moved heaven and hell, and if only to allow his brother some peace of mind.

Instead, all he could do was talk to the older prince, try to reason with him. Keep him from harm with what was his strong suit - his words.

"So what is your plan now?"

"Continue, Sammy," Dean simply answered, "Continue the search until I get answers."

"Dean... you know I love you. You are my brother and nothing could be further from my mind than to keep you from your happiness." Not letting himself get distracted by the raised eyebrow that seemed to say 'I know that, why are you telling me that now?', Sam, after a short pause, continued, "What I do not want, however, is for you to lose sight of--"

"Your Highness?" A servant bowed into the room, unaware that she had just interrupted the younger prince, and looked at Dean.

"Yes, Eileen, what is it?"

"We have received word that the one you are looking for resides in a house in the western district of the kingdom. Captain Lafitte is already at the stables and preparing to leave." Sam never got the chance to say anything before his brother was out of the door, running, as the younger prince believed, to join the castle guard's captain.

"Thank you, Eileen," he instead turned to the servant girl, who smiled shyly at the prince and was about to leave as well, but Samuel stopped her. "I'm sorry we couldn't... I wasn't in the library this morning. It's just, this whole situation... we will continue our meetings at a later date, I promise. If you still want to, that is."

"I would like that very much, your Highness. Thank you," Eileen nodded happily, and vanished through the door, followed by Sam's thoughtful gaze.

The well-read and decent young woman the prince had one morning found in the castle's large book filled room. She had been there to clean, but apparently one book had piqued her interest so much that she had gotten lost in the read. Eileen had been mortified to be caught like this, neglecting her tasks, but Samuel had successfully distracted her, pulled her into a discussion about that book he knew well. Shortly thereafter they had started to meet up in the library, using the time to talk about the things they read, they learned. There was a connection between them, the young man of royal birth and the young woman from a simple, but nonetheless respectable home, one they had cautiously started to explore since that faithful day.

As much as Sam looked forward to their next encounter; right now his sole worry was his brother. He first needed to make sure that Dean was alright. His brother would always come first, and everyone knew and respected it.

Turning to the window, he walked over to the glass front looking out to the gardens, and the stables right next to them. Down there Sam saw his brother and Benny, and half a dozen guards mounting their horses to continue the quest Dean had them on.

With a side glance to the large map of the kingdom, on which all places already visited and searched were marked, Samuel could only hope that the last remaining parts offered answers, or else all his worries could just as well come true.

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Cellar and kitchen - it were the only rooms of the house Cedric had been allowed to see in these past four days. Of course he still had to prepare the food and to clean, but he mustn't go out to the market anymore. The young man wasn't sure if Lord Crowley feared his servant wouldn't come back, or if he simply didn't want to grant him that last little bit of questionable freedom.

Lacking anything better to do except wallow in his misery, something Cedric had always tried to avoid doing, for it wasn't helping him in any way, the young man had indeed started to try and bring some tidiness into the room. He had even disassembled some of the furniture so he could store them more efficiently, and tried to wrap up valuable pieces in cloth. Maybe, one day, the lord and his daughters would be gone - he didn't stop hoping that - then he could restore the house to its old homeliness.

Until then, however, he had to make the best of the situation he was in now, and if he was honest, somehow it wasn't the worst one - at least he could spend his time among the things that reminded him of happier times, his childhood, his parents.

A sideboard had just his attention, when his ears picked up a commotion outside. It sounded like someone, or several someones, had arrived at the house. Moreover, the noises he could hear from inside the house told him that apparently the visitors were of importance, for there was rumbling and squealing from the sisters as well as shouts from Lord Crowley. A flurry of voices didn't allow for him to make out who in particular were the guests; he did notice, however, that Balthazar all of a sudden became restless as well. His faithful hound was usually rather quiet and lazy, and for the last two days he had spent most of his time in front of the small window that was the only connection to the outside world - and fresh air - Cedric had in his prison. Now, however, he seemed intent on leaving his place and find out what was happening around the building.

"Go," Cedric thus told him, nodding encouragingly, before he added with a wink, "and then let me know who is there." He could have sworn Balt rolled his eyes at that, as if to say, you know I would if I - still - could. And after everything that had happened before the young man was sure that his canine friend meant it also.

When Balthazar had trotted away, Cedric sighed and returned to his cleaning tasks. He couldn't waste time looking out of a window that wasn't going to reveal anything to him anyways.

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There was an air of tiredness surrounding the group of people riding through the forest. Even Prince Dean himself looked exhausted; and how couldn't he be. They had been out searching for days now, with barely any break, or, when it came to the royal heir himself, much sleep in between.

The majority of the search party had by now already accepted the futility of their task, though no one dared to speak up. Because even if they didn't have much, if any, hope they'd find the mysterious stranger their prince had become so obsessed with, they still wished their future king nothing but happiness, or at least closure. Too much they all loved him and his brother, those two young men many of them had known and served for years, some even since birth, and whose kindness and way to treat subjects and servants like friends rather than something beneath them was legendary.

"Your Highness, may I suggest we return to the castle? According to our maps, there is nothing else out here. I will send out guards to search the outer areas of the kingdom; if they find something, they will let us know." Captain Lafitte spoke up as he guided his horse next to Prince Dean's. Both horses and the entourage following them slowly came to a halt, and Dean sighed heavily. For a few moments he stared into the darkening forest; the sun had already begun to set. They should indeed return home.

"Yes. You are right." The royal didn't care how defeated he sounded. They had seen almost every last corner of the kingdom; places Dean didn't even know existed. Sam had been right when he told him a while ago that he needed to learn more about the lands and people he was soon going to reign.

Benny had already turned his horse and given orders to the rest of the search party; but when the prince nudged Impala to head in the opposite direction, the horse didn't obey.

"Come on, old girl, let us head home, we will not find--" The black mare didn't let him finish; she suddenly started trotting on, her pace becoming faster, in the direction they'd been heading before they had stopped. "Impala! Stop!" Dean yelled and tried to halt her movements. Instead of listening, however, the animal only continued on. The prince heard Benny call out behind him, and the sound of hoofs quickly hitting the forest floor, but didn't dare to look back. Impala had never disobeyed him like this, and never endangered him; her behavior was a riddle to him.

It took about ten minutes; then the horse's pace slowed again. Soon enough, through the trees and bushes, a structure became visible. And Dean forgot to breathe. That house in the woods, separated from the rest of the village and in the quiet solitude amidst the trees, filled Dean, as soon as he saw it, with the strangest feeling he couldn't quite place. A feeling of familiarity. A feeling of belonging.

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While Benny rang the big brass bell, Dean took in the surroundings; the walls overgrown with ivy, the broken bricks here and there, the chickens picking the ground a few meters away, the wheelbarrow to the side that had seen better times. The house appeared run-down, but also like it once had been well-loved and taken care of, before something happened that let it slowly fall apart.

It was a home full of character and life, or at least it used to be, before something or someone broke it.

The door was opened by a man in probably his mid-fifties, with a round, bearded face and short, dark hair, dressed in an immaculate suit. He was neither slim nor particularly corpulent, but he did look well-fed and healthy, much more than Dean would have expected due to the outward appearance of the estate.

The moment the man spotted him, he immediately bowed down deep.

"Your Royal Highness, it is such an honor to welcome you to my home. I am Lord Angus Crowley. How may I be of service?" the man spoke and bowed once again when he was done and had stepped aside to offer entrance.

"We are searching the lands for a young man who attended the royal ball," Benny answered in Dean's stead.

"Well, the only members of this household who had the pleasure of experiencing this wonderful evening were myself and my daughters. I am sure this person of interest is not to be found here," Crowley replied, and the prince couldn't shake this impression of duplicity interlaced in the man's words and tone. "However, I am certain that if His Royal Highness is seeking stimulating company, he will find that this house yet has something to offer."

As if on cue, two young women rushed through the door, hectically sorting their skirts so they wouldn't stumble and fall, panting, as they were out of breath, and curtsying inelegantly. Dean was sure he saw Crowley's apparently set-in-stone and all too pleasant smile slip for a moment and his eyes roll, and the royal would have felt sympathy for the older man, hadn't he been so obviously two-faced and calculating. And made Dean's skin crawl. The devil couldn't have been worse to face.

"Are the three of you the only ones in this household? You said you were the ones to attend the ball, this lets me assume there are others who live here," Benny, entirely unimpressed by all the commotion, inquired.

"Oh yes, it is just us who are of importance, I assure you. Certainly His Royal Highness is not looking for dirty, meager servants that never leave the house." The lord laughed, as were his daughters who he shoved into the direction of the carriage. Everyone else present, however, didn't find any humor in the manners of the three individuals. The guard's captain's expression became so dark that Dean even had to keep himself from smirking; he knew what it meant when Benny showed himself this unhappy. It didn't bode well for Crowley and his daughters.

"Nonetheless," the royal heir now decided to say something himself, "I would like to meet them. Every. Single. Person. Of this household. If you please."

"I am afraid there is no one else here at the moment," the lord answered through gritted teeth, and it became obvious to the prince that this afternoon wasn't going the way the other man had hoped. Especially when Crowley once more ushered his daughters towards the royal entourage. He probably would have sat them in the carriages hadn't it been for Benny and the other guards shielding the coach as well as the prince himself.

Barking made Dean look around in curiosity and let him forget the reply that was on his tongue. Seconds later a dog, not the youngest of age anymore it seemed, came running towards them, yapping so forcefully that his forefeet left the ground with every sound he made. Several times the animal turned around, looking back at the prince, as if he wanted to tell him to follow him, and Dean was tempted to simply head after the hound. That was until the lord appeared in his line of sight, looking over his shoulder at the animal.

"Will you be quiet, you stupid dog!" Crowley growled, and even though he tried to keep his voice as low as possible, it was not low enough to keep it from Dean, who was shocked at what he heard - and saw when the older man kicked his foot in the direction of the hound.

"You will be quiet now!" the prince almost yelled at that point, angry and disgusted by the older man's behavior, and the man in question widened his eyes, shrinking back a little, curling his spine the tiniest bit in an almost-bow. Assured that Crowley was not going to interfere again, the dog regained confidence, it seemed, and walked three steps before once more looking back at Dean and waiting for him to follow. And so the prince did.

Escorted by the rest of the present persons, the royal was led to the side of the house and a cellar window next to which the hound sat down. Dean heard a strange whimper behind him then and didn't need to look to know it was the lord.

"Please, Your Highness, there is nothing down there except for dirt and old trinkets no one needs anymore," Crowley tried to stop him from going any closer to the opening to the houses' sub-ground level, but was eventually forcefully held back by the guards while Dean, accompanied by Benjamin, slowly approached the window.

He could have sworn the dog nodded encouragingly at him.

"Hello? Is someone down there?" Dean asked cautiously and crouched down next to the hound sitting a few steps away from the light well, his tail still wagging rapidly. For several seconds, nothing happened; no sound was heard, no answer was given. Maybe the dog had just been overexcited by something to eat or play with, after all.

He was about to stand up again, when his ears caught the faintest rustling sound. Leaning closer, he breathed in to ask for an answer again, out of hope and a distinct premonition, but was stopped by someone speaking up.

"Prince Dean?"

The voice almost made his heart stop. It couldn't be, could it? Had he really found him, his stranger, his angel, where he had been ready to give up hope? Where he had been ready to believe that he was only chasing a dream, after all?

"Angel? Is that you?"

---

When Cedric had been a boy the voice that had never failed to calm him had been that of his mother. A natural thing, he assumed, had it been the one voice that had always been part of his life, even before his birth. His father's deep, warm rumble had been a close second, and he remembered oftentimes just listening to the sound instead of following the words when his father had read him bed-time stories.

The voice of Crowley and even more so his daughters, however, had been a constant reminder of everything that was wrong in his life, everything that had gone wrong ever since he had lost his parents.

The sound of voices held significance, one way or another. Even the bark of Balthazar, something most wouldn't even be able to differentiate from another, brought comfort due to its familiarity.

When Cedric heard Prince Dean speak, the feeling that befell him was without comparison. It was the notion of happiness, of freedom; of knowing everything would be alright. Still, he answered with caution, worried that maybe, just maybe, his mind was beginning to play tricks on him. But when Dean spoke once more in reply to the servant boy's inquiringly saying the royal's name, a battalion of rocks fell from his heart and shoulders.

"Yes, it is me." He confirmed, yet refrained from explaining why he was in the cellar.

"Angel, I need to talk to you. Please. Come out here to me."

Slowly Cedric stepped into the light, and just as hesitantly wrapped his fingers around the iron bars. Seeing Dean's face again, the young man was glad he had found something to hold on to, because his knees immediately weakened and his breath got stuck in his chest. It was this beautiful, kind face he had longed to see again, but never dared to hope to.

"Angel?" Dean whispered once more, seemingly as moved by their reencounter as Cedric was himself.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I..." He couldn't tell him. He mustn't. Lord Crowley would never allow it and if Dean learned who Cedric really was...

"Please, angel. I just want to talk. You don't need to come with me, nor do you need to see me ever again if you wish so. Only allow me a mere few minutes."

"My Prince... I mean, Your Highness, I... I'm not... the door is--"

"Your Royal Highness, if I may," Crowley interrupted the exchange, oblivious to the depth of connection between the two men, "he is just a servant boy. So entirely below your class and standards. I am sure you will much more enjoy the--"

"Lord Crowley," Dean cut him off mid-sentence, his voice hard and laced with anger, and stood up to full height. "I am sure that you have no idea whatsoever what I enjoy. Nor do you know my *standards*. Certainly it isn't disdain for those who are not of royal or noble birth. We are all still humans, and everyone deserves respect. Even you, though you seem to have no notion of the same for anyone except yourself." The older man opened and closed his mouth several times, not bringing out a single word. "And now bring me to him."

"Why do you want Cinderic when you can have me?" Rubina cried, suddenly standing before Dean. She tried to throw her arms around the prince's neck, but Benny was quick to rush to her and yank her back on her arms so forcefully that she stumbled. She would have fallen had the guard not held her. He used the momentum to sit her down on an old, wooden bench, his dark look making it clear to her that she rather not try and get up again as long as the royal visitors were still there.

"This family is crazy," the guard's captain murmured, shaking his head, and Cedric, having heard the man from his prison's small window, sighed. He wished he could protest now, demand the man to correct his notion; but he knew it was true. His step-family were lunatics and he, a little bit maybe, too. After all was it the only explanation why he hadn't run away a long time ago.

As he heard the entourage of people outside walk away, Cedric himself began to pace restlessly. Would Prince Dean really come down into the cellar to meet him? What was he going to say about the betrayal, about the pretense of being someone he wasn't, someone of status, someone... worthy?

That night at the ball had been a dream, nothing more; neither had he meant it to become anything else. As much as he dreamt, it didn't change who he was.

A mere servant.

But for these few precious hours he had dreamt. He had allowed himself to believe that he could be someone else; that his life could be something else. That his life could be... well... a *life*. Beyond servitude and ill-advised loyalty. Maybe, for a moment or two, stolen between blinks of an eye, he had *truly* believed.

Alas, what did it change? He was who he was. And Dean would soon see the truth and reality.

The door opened and Dean walked through, and the servant's heart skipped a beat.

"My angel," the prince said, almost reverently, and Cedric's heart missed another.

There he stood in the middle of the room, rooted to the spot, not daring to approach the prince. In his dirty clothes, hair unruly and hands dark from the ashes he'd been cleaning out earlier, but not having been allowed to wash himself after, he certainly looked the name he had been given by his step-family: Cinderic. He was not worth the presence or even interest of a royal heir to the throne.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, his voice rough, and bowed deep. The bow, however, was short-lived when he felt a hand on his shoulder and Dean straightening him up again, before a second hand cupped his face. The green eyes looking at him intensely seemed to glow with happiness, and Cedric silently begged his legs to not give out from under him.

"I believe we are already past that," Dean said, winking at him. When the other man didn't understand at first, his forehead forming a frown, he added, "It's Dean, angel. And you still owe me your name."

"Your Highness... I mean, Dean... I mean..."

"You see, Your Highness, Cedric isn't even able to articulate himself in the presence of---"

Crowley's mouth snapped shut the moment Dean, still standing with his back to the lord, raised a hand, all the while smiling fondly at the young, blue-eyed man.

"Cedric." Dean said it with a nod, as if it was an important political, or tactical information. One he had long been waiting for and he needed further on. The other man almost sobbed.

"I am sorry you have to see me like this. And I am sorry I misled you by my appearance at the ball. I am just a servant, I own neither land nor riches. What once was my parents' is now in the possession of Lord Crowley. I have nothing to offer except for--"

"Yourself," the prince finished for him after he had stopped his flow of words by placing a finger over the other man's lips. "And that is all I desire. I don't care about status, Cedric. I don't care about titles. May you be a servant, or may you be a prince, may you even be a king - the only thing that matters is who you are inside." Dean lifted the finger away and instead carefully placed same hand over Cedric's heart, wary in the touch, as he surely feared the young man would run away. Again. "You are full of kindness, and you are knowledgeable, even wise, more than your age should allow, and certainly more so than my brother, something I never thought possible." The prince smiled at the thought; as clever as Sammy was, he was no match for Cedric. Though he couldn't wait for those two to meet and get into a discussion.

"My prince..."

"Let me make you a prince, let me give you the life and status you deserve, so no one will ever question your worthiness again. And let me give you my love, of which my heart is overflowing when I think of you." It was almost a plea. "You are everything a man can wish for in his partner. And thus I ask you, my dearest Cedric--"

"Castiel."

"Sorry?"

"It is a name my parents wished to give me, but they weren't allowed to. Every night, for two years, they had prayed upon the angels to give them a child. When my mother learned she was going to have me it was a Thursday. To honor the angels who had granted them their wish they chose to name me after the Angel of

Thursday, Castiel. I was never Cedric, and thanks to Lord Crowley's misuse and deformation of it, I also do not wish to carry the name anymore."

"Then you are Castiel. I like it much better also," Dean smiled. "My Castiel. My angel." Dean took Castiel's hands in his and looked him deep in the eyes. "Will you be my partner in life, at my side, faithful forever, until death do us part and beyond?"

"Yes, Dean. Yes, I will. Evermore."

And they sealed it with a kiss.

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*Maybe not always the affairs of the real world are what provide us with fairytales - but surely they are what adds the spice to these tales.*

*No one will ever know if the fate Princes Dean and Sam chose for themselves is what Queen Mary and King John had in mind when they sent their sons on their way into life. But one can be assured that as long as the princes are happy, neither the late queen nor king would begrudge them their choices.*

*A love story will always have the known conclusion - we all are expecting and waiting for it. But the path to that conclusion is never twice the same. There are obstacles to overcome, anxieties and worries to be prevailed over; there are choices to make, goodbyes to say and greetings to be passed on. And where one finds love in another person, the next will rather seek it in knowledge and experience.*

*It had always been the older of the two brothers that ventured out, looking to discover the world beyond the castle's walls, not interested in marriage or kingship, as much as his parents wanted him to fulfill his obligation.*

*Prince Sam, on the other hand, was content to remain in the castle, and see the world through books and the eyes of their subjects, at his side a young woman with a gentle soul and a sharp mind, there to advise him whenever counsel was needed. And maybe, one day, she would become the caretaker of his heart also.*

*Thus the kingdom's new ruler was introduced as King Samuel to the people, and accepted warmly by everyone.*

*Castiel and Dean, however, began a new journey, in every way, travelling the lands as far as horse and feet would carry them, doing good to the people, and relishing in the love they had found in each other.*

THE END